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WINTER QUARTERS

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WINTER QUARTERS

by

PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON

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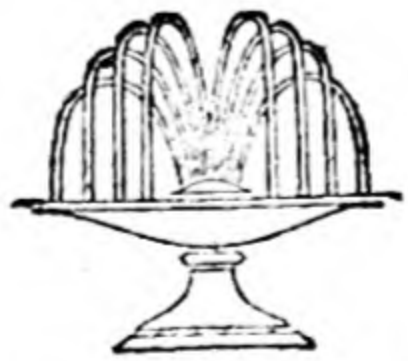

COLLINS
14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON

To
MALIN and DOUGLAS GOLDRING
with admiration and affection.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As there can be no such thing as a "typical" soldier, neither can there be a "typical" cross-section of army life: and in this book I have intended no generalisations of any sort whatsoever.

My aim has been simply to explore the reactions of 'ordinary' men to an 'extra-ordinary' way of living, and I hope no reader will think that I have had the temerity or the impertinence to attempt a military commentary. The action of WINTER QUARTERS takes place during the anxious lull that preceded the offensive of the Eighth Army in Egypt.

P.H.J.

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CHARACTERS

SOLDIERS

HUMPHREY BRACKETT	*Colonel of the Regiment*
STEWART CAMERON-LECKIE (MAJOR)	*The Battery Commander* (" *B.C.*")
CLAUD PICKERING (CAPTAIN)	*The Battery Captain* (" *B.K.*")
TOM GLAIDEN, CLIFFORD TOLLER	*Lieutenants*
PHILIP STRUTT, ERIC CASSILIS, IVES ELVORDEN, BERT LILLEY	*2nd Lieutenants*
EDWARD (TODDY) FESLE	*Battery Sergeant Major*
ALF CONWAY	*Battery Quartermaster Sergeant*
RON MENHENHEOTT	*A troop sergeant*
FRED TOFFIT	*A bombardier*
CHRIS DAKIN	*A lance-bombardier*
VICTOR TAWNEY, SIDNEY MANGAN, TOM BERRY, ETC.	*Gunners*
PENRY STURGESS	*Battery Clerk*
SCOTT, LEJARDIN	*Storemen*
WILLIE MULCASTER	*A batman*
BUTTERFIELD	*A mess servant*

GOVT. GIRLS

CIVILIANS

STACEY STRUTT IDA FELSE BUNTY LILLEY	*Soldiers' wives*
SAM EAGLES	*Landlord of The Golden Fleece*
GILLIAN EAGLES	*His wife*
MICHAEL	*Their son, aged 2*
EILEEN FOGG PHYLLIS RICKS MAY BUDGEN, ETC.	*Local Girls*
MRS. FOGG	*Eileen's mother*
GLADYS FOGG	*Her aunt*
CHARMIAN PICKERING	*The Battery Captain's half-sister*
LADY ARCHER (HELENA)	*His step-mother*
MADGE EMMOT	*Dakin's friend*
MAUD FLETCHER	*Engaged to Menhenheott*
MRS. MILLS	*Proprietress of The Lamb*
MRS. PIGGOT	*A shop-keeper*
MISS WEBBE	*A seamstress*
LUCY	*A servant at the Fleece*
THE REV. ARTHUR TENBY	*Vicar of All Saints*
NELLIE HATTERAS	*A NAAFI waitress*

CHAPTER I

SOLDIERS

"WE HAD a mouse last night," said Cassilis.

Hearing the sounds of morning yet anchored still to his mysterious dream, Philip Strutt drew his knees up to his chin and slid further down into the blankets, thus hoping, with a part of his mind divorced from that part which was intent upon following a night adventure, to resist the awakening. Mulcaster's boots chopped across the wooden floor. The plasterboards flapped as they were withdrawn from the windows. A cup clinked in a saucer. And so, said Strutt to himself, desperately prodding a fading vision, I got to the top of the hill and there, at the foot, I saw Blanco in his white mack signalling with two tennis rackets. Something dreadful was about to happen, but what? Goon: what?

"A great fat brute with a tail," said Cassilis, "a real monster. We must have a blitz on him."

"Morning, sir. Sir! Here's your tea."

The white mackintosh flapped, became a corner of the pillow preternaturally clear in every crease. Into a red dusk intruded a ray of troubling light. Strutt pulled the bedclothes down to his chin and nodded to the batman. Mulcaster's face, which had the sweet-simple cunning of a Shakesperean clown's, beamed a morning welcome. Strutt took the tea, handed the saucer to Mulcaster and tried, recumbent, to drink from the tilted cup. "Thank you. Morning, Eric. What's the weather like?" He ran his tongue about a sour and woollen mouth.

"You sit up and find out. You can't drink lying on your back, not without making a filthy mess. Oh, Mulcaster, *re* our mouse. Mr. Strutt didn't see him because he was sleeping like the dead, but I did. Heard a scrabbling, so I put on my torch and there he was, shinning like a two-year old up the black-out."

"Perhaps he was a two-year old," Strutt suggested.

The batman regarded the skirting. "Did he? If I'd been here I'd of caught him in me hand. Used to catch 'em by the gross at home. Sit on a chair I would, by the hole,

hours and hours together—patience is what you want—and when he popped out,"—his eyes glazed with the memory of delight in achievement—" I'd just put me hand over him neat as you please. Good mouser, my wife used to call me. ' No need to keep a cat,' she'd say. This was how I'd do it." He dropped down on to one knee, his movements suggestively feline, and glanced from Strutt to Cassilis, claiming their attention for the performance. " Now : he comes out there—See, sir ? Wait for him . . here we are . . any minute now . ." His hand flashed out, snapped shut upon air. " Got him ! "

Cassilis applauded the performance. " Very good, Mulcaster. Interesting. All the same, we can't have you in here all night, so will you please set a trap ? " He threw off the bed-clothes, sprang out of bed and fell immediately to warming exercises, up, down, bend and stretch. " Come on, Strutty, upsidaisy. Only be the worse if you put it off."

" Here, Mulcaster, I've lost a couple of buttons from my greatcoat. There are two spares in the drawer, so sew them on for me, will you ? No hurry, so long as I have it by to-night."

When the batman had gone Strutt rolled over in the blankets and stared with distasteful admiration at Cassilis, who had taken off his pyjama coat and, hands on his hips, was swinging his thin, parchment-coloured body from side to side. " How you *can*."

" Makes me warm. Look at me, I'm glowing ! "

" You can burn, for all I care. What do you think of our mouser ? "

" I take a dim view of mousing for grown men. Come on, get out. P.T. in fifteen minutes. Up. Up with you."

Rising, Strutt put on shorts, a vest and a zippered pullover. He was twenty-seven years of age, his hair, flesh and eyes light brown in colour, his body slender but firmly-fleshed. " My wife's coming down this evening."

" Does Sadness know ? He's not keen on wives."

" I asked him. He didn't mind."

" Coming to the dance to-morrow night ? "

" I expect so. You mean me, don't you, not Sadness ? "

" Yes, I mean you." Cassilis dragged on his sweater, said, " God, how I hate the army." He said this every morning, as if it were a confession of faith. By profession

a stage-designer, by temperament little fitted for a regimented life, he endured the years of training for war only by working rather harder than he needed, playing games more strenuously. He was senior liaison officer of the Battery. Everyone liked him, everyone trusted him and no one ever thought of giving him any job of importance; perhaps because he was, for all his willingness to oblige the army, so plainly unhappy in it.

"Never mind, you'll be out of it some time. Meanwhile, the dance should be good. Makes a break. The Sergeant's Dance wasn't bad last week, was it?"

"Except when Menhenheott played the cornet," Cassilis replied, reminiscently wincing. He saw the clock. "Hi, come on, look slippy. It's getting late."

"You go. I'll be out in a minute."

Strutt, alone in the bedroom, took out a letter he had on the previous day received from his wife, and re-read it. 'Ferris has been a dear lately and abnormally considerate. Even took me out and fed me last night, believe it or not.' Three lines further on—'Ferris was wasting time telling me all about his years in Italy. He had a villa near Sorrento until August 1939, when he got rid of it, not being sure of Mussolini.' Not like Stacey, somehow, to keep on and on about somebody, letter after letter. To hell with Ferris. Nice soft job at home and making free with the soldier's wife. Damned Uriah, me. Perhaps.

Nonsense. She's bored; she's got to write about something. Married for five years, and I'm making this kind of fool of myself. That's what the army does for you.

Thrusting the letter back into his locker he went down into the cobbled yard, where Cassilis and Bert Lilley were kicking a football about to keep themselves warm. It was a blue and glistening morning, the frost meshes thick upon the grass borders, the webs beaded with silver. A cold October.

Gunner Victor Tawney leaned across the NAAFI bar and, the cynosure of attentive eyes, drew upon the back of an envelope two small concentric triangles. "Now." He handed the stub of pencil to Dakin. "You, Chris. In this space,"—he indicated the left diagonal—"write, 'what the.'" His face was dark, grave, absorbed. He was well-

groomed, well-shone. Battle-dress sat upon him slickly as the suit of harlequin, for his hips were narrow and his legs long.

"'What the?'"

"That's it."

Chris Dakin, lance-bombardier, sucked his pencil, seemed unwilling to play. He was a lean, pale boy, his skin ever erupting into small, golden-headed boils, his lower lids stained with a violet transparency. At last he wrote in the words dictated to him. "O.K.?"

"Oke. Now you, Sid."

Sidney Mangan accepted the pencil, grinned in anticipation of a great joke. "What do I do, teacher?"

"You fill in the other side. 'Bride said.'"

"'Bride?'"

"'Bride said.'"

"Oh, it's one of those *rude* ones," Mangan squeaked in a high falsetto. He waggled his hips, simulated coyness. His greying moustache blew out and in. He wrote, printing the small letters.

Looking round for a third participant, Tawney saw Penry Sturgess, the battery clerk, come into the canteen. "Here, Pen, I want you."

Sturgess joined the group. "What's up?"

"Little experiment. I want you to write something."

"What?"

"See this drawing?"

"Yes."

"Well, along the bottom line——"

"We used to call it the hypotenuse when I was at school," Sturgess said, smiling uneasily. He scented that he was to be the subject of a joke, was a little embarrassed.

"The what?" asked Dakin.

"Oh, aren't you ignorant!" Mangan mocked, beating him between the shoulder-blades. "I thought you went to a swell Secondary school, like Pen here. A hypotenuse is something you see in the Zoo."

"Oh, no," Tawney replied gravely, "you've got it all wrong, Sid. It's the thing Mister Elvorden calls reasonable. Remember him yesterday? 'Let us assume that London loses its popularity as a residential centre; I think that a reasonable hypotenuse.'"

They laughed, remembering the ABCD talk.

"I think Mister Elvorden is so, so pretty," said Mangan, "he makes my heart go pit-a-pat, he does."

Dakin stirred his cocoa rapidly to whiteness. "Oh, I don't know. Elvorden's not bad."

"Eily thinks he's all right," said Fred Toffit, a small, square bombardier, snorting with rare mirth, "she said he was her idea of a film-star."

Mangan said sharply, "Eily? When did she say that?"

Toffit stared at him. "Didn't you know? She's here. Saw her out last night when I was coming back from the M.T. park."

"What's she doing here?"

"Said she was going to work for the Geogehans, up at the big house. She's back with her ma in Christenhurst."

"She's a damned pest, that kid. If I had my way I'd lock her up, yes, and put her in chains, like the Germans do." Mangan added, thoughtfully, "She'd be safer herself that way, poor little runt." He had daughters of his own. One was three, the other five.

"Here, here," Tawney protested, "what about my joke? Here, Pen." He indicated the tiny space, no more than an inch across. "You write, 'On her wedding night.'"

Sturgess considered, tested the pencil-point on his hand, took out his fountain pen. "Lucky I write small," he remarked, and filled in the phrase in minute copperplate.

There was silence. "Don't get it," said Mangan.

Tawney was dismayed. "Curse you, Pen, you've spoiled it. I might have had more sense than to pick on a god-forsaken clerk who got his practice writing the Lord's Prayer on threepenny bits. You said the wrong thing."

Lejardin, one of the storemen, came up to the bar, twitched up the paper and laughed. He knew the joke. "You, Sturgess, ought to have said . . ." He explained matters.

Sturgess laughed.

Chris Dakin, who hated such humour, rose and left the canteen.

Tawney said, in his lazy and pleasant voice, "Sorry. Joke over. Never could do anything right, not even card-tricks."

"What do you mean, '*even* card-tricks?'" Toffit was

offended. "Takes years learning some of 'em. Got to be smart. I could show you a few 'ud pop your eyes out on stalks."

Tawney noticed the time. "Here, come on. Jillo. We've got Strutt's drill order. You can show me your tricks some other time, Fred, and I bet I find the lady. How much, Nellie?"

Nellie Hatteras looked down her long nose at him, counted on her fingers.

"Sevenpence, and fourpence from last night."

He gave her a shilling, pretended to count very carefully the two halfpennies she gave him in change, gazed at her through the girlish silk of his lashes.

"Mean," Nellie commented, pouting, "You'd steal a worm from a blind hen, you would."

He blew her a kiss. Nellie, who had a civilian lover, flapped her hand broadly across her face to indicate that she was not impressed. With Mangan and Toffit, he left the NAAFI.

Ron Menhenheott, troop sergeant, and Toddy Felse, the Battery Sergeant Major, were in the sergeant's mess, finishing their morning cups of tea.

Menhenheott, short and powerful, the hair bright as copper wire upon his bullet head, murmured, "Strutt's drill order to-day."

"How are things going since he took your troop over?" Felse asked, "Get on with him?"

The sergeant paused for a moment before replying as, indeed, did all persons of caution when Felse questioned them; for there was no knowing to what use he would put an answer. He was a little, blackly-shining man, sharp as a needle, having loyalty to none save to the Battery Commander who, for some reason inexplicable even to Felse himself, released in him a spring of emotion that was beyond liking, beyond devotion, beyond love in any of the forms in which men recognise it.

Felse was a regular soldier who had served his time in a famous field brigade. Like Glaiden and Cameron-Leckie, he had served in France. He had been twice wounded, once at Amiens, once at Dunkirk, and on his return to England had been decorated. He carried a newspaper cutting of himself

outside the gates of Buckingham Palace, his wife gripping his arm, his plump child crawling over his face.

When he came out of hospital he joined an Anti-Tank regiment, where he soon became a Warrant Officer. He was first on the list for promotion to Regimental Sergeant Major and should, all things considered, have been happy, had he not discovered that his battery was to be quartered, for the winter, in the very village where his wife's sister was living.

Twice he had been offered a commission, had twice refused it. For one thing, he was better off as he was; for another, his fierce wife Ida had been over-insistent that he should, for the neighbours' sakes, become an officer; and this was one of the few things in which he could thwart her. He had been in the army since he was twenty, and the army was his love. The Army and Cameron-Leckie, one and the same, interchangeable. When he thought of famous soldiers, of Cæsar, Alexander, Marlborough, Wellington, Foch, he gave them dark Scottish faces, could not believe that they had ever smiled.

"Strutt's all right," said Menhenheott at last. "Knows his job. Knows it better than Tubby Glaiden and pretty near as well as Blanco. The B.C. likes him too. I know. I always know."

Felse drank up his tea and dropped a cigarette end into the dregs. "How's Dakin shaping? I gave him a rocket last week, sloppy brute. Buttons filthy, and saluting like he was picking chats out of his hair."

"Oh, not so bad. Best thing to do—or so I find," Menhenheott added in tactful parenthesis—"is to let him go ahead and not pull him up any more than you have to. He gets the wind up and then he's sunk."

"Insurance clerk," Felse said contemptuously, "thinks he's too good for us."

Menhenheott grinned. "Well, Sir, I can't say Tawney puts on side, and he's quite the duke. In his way. You know, he'd make a gunner, he would, if he wasn't so—so—I don't know what. Indifferent. Don't seem to care if he lives nor dies."

"He's a mystery. Two O.C.T.U.s R.T.U.'d him, know that? And he's a gentleman. Public school. Say what you like about promotion from the ranks, it helps if you can talk B.B.C. a bit. Of course, I——" Felse stopped. He was ever

fearful that others should learn of his own refusal to take a commission lest, by some esoteric means, the news should seep through to his wife.

Menhenheott murmured, " On the whole, you bet it does. Depends on the regiment, though. Well, I'd better be going or Strutt'll raise hell. He raises hell quite a bit, only nicely, if you know what I mean. So long, sir."

" So long."

Felse watched him go. Then he went across to the Battery Office, where he settled down to page three of a long and mollifying letter to Ida.

" . . . I'm sorry I haven't written but honest I've been rushed about half barmy since you were last down. No, don't come till the end of the month because I'd have no time to see you, you don't know what it's like here nowadays, honest you don't . . ."

The Battery Captain, returning from an inspection of Strutt's gun positions, paused on the crest of the hill and looked down with pleasure upon Christenhurst. The village lay small and square in the richness of autumn, the rough-cast cottages catching brilliance from the sun, the orange rooftops drawing from it some appearance of textural change, as if the bricks might yield like gingerbread to the pressure of a finger. The pines were a dark glaze of greenness on the screen of burning colour, affording to the eyes a relief from umber, crimson and rose. All Saints was sharp as a shape of cardboard against the field rising behind it, where the cabbage lines streamed upwards in smoky jade across the rosewood soil. Pickering saw Lilley's troop drilling outside the Fleece, little men from a Noah's ark extremely and pointlessly busy. The sun struck fire from the golden sign, from the buttons on the sergeant's cap. The command exploded within the gathered hills.

Pickering saw the landscape in terms of paint, shading, narrowing his eyes in order to fit into a framework the imagined composition. Bonnard stuff : nice : but no place to live in. Men get browned-off. Nothing to do in the evenings but drink in the Fleece, if you want hot music and a look at Gillie, at the Lamb if you want to fug under the oil-lamps. How do they feel about this sort of warring, the men who have never seen action ? Hard to tell. Non-

committal at the discussions, careful not to put the left foot forward. Do they want to get down to fighting? Well, yes and no. A good bit of Second Front stuff. 'Why are we leaving the war to Russia?' Menhenheott said to Elvorden. 'It makes me ashamed.' Elvorden said, 'Well, Sergeant, that's too bad. We must see what Churchill can do about it.' Elvorden is a bumptious ass, and the men don't like him. A prep-school master scoring off ten-year olds.

A sudden transmutation of the sunlight, changing and deepening the handful of colours thrown down into the trough of the hills, gave him a sudden sense of joy, of delight in England. The village, built about the cross formed by the Strethamfold Road and the shallow stream running gelatinously golden over the cresses and the livid moss, had a shy, obstinate glory of its own, assuming to itself, but in a half-truth, the English name. If this is England, then of such a country Elvorden is squire, riding roughshod on his high horse. But England is London, and Leeds, and Manchester. Menhenheott is England: and Toffit, and Felsebalham and Finsbury Park. Wigan. Bootle. Crewe station. The factories and the mines, the Bank tube at rush-hour.

Along the hedgerows, garlanded with berries so luminous that each one seemed to hold within it a wing of flame, ran a shrew, nervous as a soldier lost in No Man's Land. Good prey for Mulcaster. Strutt was funny about that at breakfast. Strutt: yes. What's been the matter with him lately? He wasn't too sober at the Fleece last night, and that's out of character. Wife's coming down for the week-end, though; perhaps she'll put it right. The married men, if they live continently, can be temperamental now and again.

Conscious suddenly of the sun's warmth, Pickering took off his whitish mackintosh and slung it over his arm. He went slowly downhill, thinking consciously of nothing at all. Lejardin passed by, precisely saluting, smiling as he did so. I think that perhaps I am not too bad a soldier, because the men smile when they salute me. The most remarkable thing about this war is that I have become a soldier at all.

Tom Glaiden, Bert Lilley and young Elvorden sat together in the bay-window of the ante-room. Glaiden and Lilley were troop commanders, Elvorden, who held the newest commission and had only recently joined the regiment, was

a liaison officer. Glaiden was thirty-five and looked ten years older. He was fairly tall and fairly stout, his small, bright blue eyes bloodshot beneath flaxen lashes of a remarkable and somewhat repellent thickness. His hair grew in little blond spurts from a centre parting and was much darkened by brilliantine. Bert Lilley, a second lieutenant, was twenty-six, a short, dark, shining man with tiny waist and womanish hips. Elvorden was twenty-two; his face was beautiful and serene, the full lips having the repose of perfect confidence, the eyes the repose of long experience that if money is needed there is plenty in the bank, that if a meal is ordered it will arrive, perfectly cooked, upon the table at the appointed hour, that if clothes are worn somebody will take them away and replace them by new ones.

"Hedy Lamarr," said Lilley, showing fine white teeth above which a little stiff moustache bristled and gleamed, is "my own darling. I like 'em juicy. There was a girl in an Ivor Novello show I saw last leave, too, who was pretty nearly as good, but I can't remember her name."

"Tell you who I used to like, only she might be before your time. Ever see that film, *Sunshine Susie*? There was a girl in that, Renate Müller. Plump piece. I've never seen a finer." Glaiden jerked his head vaguely to the right. "Better than Gillie, even."

"Have to be good, then. Oh, I remember her all right; the German girl, I mean. Wasn't she Hitler's houri?"

Elvorden said, "My uncle met her over there once. Early on, about 1934, when he went to shoot with Goering; that was when Germany seemed O.K. and we all thought Hitler quite a lad."

"Where's your uncle now," Glaiden grinned, "in Brixton? That's where you get for knowing Goering."

"No, he's in the M.O.I.," Elvorden replied seriously.

Lilley protested, "Good God, if one got stuck in clink because one saw the good in Adolf—and I still think he has his points—there wouldn't be many of us left."

"I never thought Adolf had his points," Glaiden murmured. "Why, did you?"

"Well, damn it, you can't get away from some things. Clearing up unemployment, for example."

"Only by chucking everything into war industry."

"And he did make Germany a nation again."

"But what a nation!"

Elvorden flushed. "I don't see there's anything wrong in acknowledging that an enemy may have some good about him. It's been the British tradition to do just that."

"If it hadn't been the British tradition," Glaiden snapped, "we wouldn't be at war now."

"If you ask me," Lilley retorted, "we wouldn't be at war if Elvorden's tradition had been followed up to the end. We had a hope at Munich, whatever anyone may say."

Glaiden opened his eyes so widely that the lines of blood stretched out over the cornea like rivers on a map. "Do you know what I did on Munich day? I went out and vomited." His stare become opaque, belligerent. "Yes. With nothing to vomit on, too. I was stone-cold sober, and I hadn't had a meal, and I vomited. I tell you,"—he brought his fist down so heavily upon the table-top that Elvorden's glass rattled and the stout ran in a string of froth down the side of it—"I'd rather go through Dunkirk a second time than go through Munich again." Glaiden was the only one of them who had been in France with the B.E.F.; and this fact gave his words some weight or, at least, checked any direct answer.

"Well, one thing good about Germany," said Lilley, after a moment or so, "was the beer."

"Granted." Glaiden, reminded of beer, ordered another pint. He said jocularly, "*Prosit!*"

"Cheerio, old boy. I had a thick night there once, when I went over with a girl-friend of mine. I don't mind telling you ——"

Elvorden peered out through the thick, distorting panes. "Here comes Blanco."

Pickering took off his cap as he came up the broad stone steps. The sun touched his lint-white hair, his long, sober face. He was joined by the Battery Commander, Cameron-Leckie, and the two men went together into the mess.

"He's with Sadness."

"Oh, God," said Lilley, "watch your tongues. Sadness don't like booze-talk—that's because he's only an *ersatz* Scotsman—and Blanco can't stand Hedy Lamarr. Only pictures he likes are those religious stumers he's got stuck up over his bed. Don't know what these captains are coming to. In the last war it would have been Kirchner." He

hesitated. Then he said to Elvorden, "Ever seen my little Academy?"

"What academy?"

"Postcards. Pretty ones."

"Don't go showing those around," said Glaiden sharply.

"All right, all right. But they gave you a laugh, didn't they?"

"I'd have laughed at anything that night."

Pickering and Cameron-Leckie came into the room, ordered whisky and came to join the subalterns in the window.

"Strutt's scheme going well, sir?" Elvorden enquired, with conscientious interest.

Cameron-Leckie, nodding, stretched his mouth slightly, symbolising a smile. "Seems so. He's got his guns pretty well placed, especially one covering Sedger's Bridge. Dakin was making an ass of himself. Know Dakin?"

"Pimpled chap," said Lilley, "reads highbrow stuff where you can see him at it, much good may it do him. Pal of Tawney's. Both think they're too good for the ranks."

"Dakin was having hysterics to-day, or pretty near," Pickering said slowly. "I saw it. He'd made a mess of something—don't quite know what—and Menhenheott gave him a mild rocket. Dakin went off, tripped over a tree-root and fell rather heavily, grazing the skin off one side of his face. No serious hurt, but he got into a state about it and began to cry, which embarrassed everybody. Strutt came up then and sent him off to the M.O. I wish we could pack chaps like Dakin out of the army; it's a waste of time trying to make soldiers of them."

"It's worse in a way with that man Tawney," said Glaiden, "because he could be a soldier if he liked; only he doesn't like."

"I hate the men sometimes," Lilley said with sudden, gusty savagery, "they make me puke."

The Major checked him sharply. "I hope that's only a passing mood. It's not a helpful one for an officer."

Lilley coloured, and smiled. "Very passing, sir. Sorry. It was just that I agreed with Glaiden over Tawney."

"Do you know who his father is?" Pickering asked idly, "He's Kenrick Tawney, the essayist. So good, they put his

stuff into matriculation papers. The mother's a barrister. Very brilliant family. It's curious the son's such a failure. He's a nice fellow, though, and a good mixer. The lads like him."

The Major had left the group; so Lilley said, "Our Gillian doesn't."

Pickering glanced at him, his veiled grey eyes non-committal. "Is he one of the *prétendants* to Mrs. Eagles?"

"Oh, come, sir," said Elvorden, "who isn't?"

"Well, I'm not, I assure you. My sympathies are with Sam."

"Never mind," Glaiden murmured, "Gillie's nose will be out of joint soon. Eily's here."

Pickering sat up, frowned and slapped his knee. "Eileen Fogg? Since when?"

"Yesterday. She's back with her mother at Yew Cottage and working for the Geogehans."

"Oh, is she! I'd like to lock that child up. She was always hanging round the camp when we were at Strethamfold and pestering the men. And I swear she's not a day over sixteen."

"She hasn't exactly done anything you can nail her for," Lilley said, smiling.

"Is she that pathetic skivvy with the yellow sausage curls?" asked Elvorden.

"That's the one. Unless you mean Phyllis Ricks, the girl who chases Menhenheott. She's blonde."

"Oh, come," Glaiden intervened, "Phyllis Ricks isn't pathetic. She's a handsome girl. It only beats me why he fights shy of her."

"Because," Lilley said, "he's engaged to a woman at home. That's why. I had it from Felse. Makes our Ron miserable, too, because he isn't so disinclined towards Phyllis as he'd have you think."

"Well," Pickering murmured, rising, "time to eat. I'm hungry, if no one else is, and I've got a lecture to B troop this afternoon. Strutt was to take it, but he won't be finished till late."

"Can't Cassilis?" Glaiden suggested, "He talks well."

"Cassilis is taking A troop for ABCA, and Toller's got to recce a cross-country run for next week. No; I'm afraid it's my misfortune." Pickering moved away.

Lilley whispered to Elvorden, " Haughty dog, ain't he ? "

" Oh, he's not so bad."

" Used to be an art critic, he says. Wonder what he'd think of my art studies ? "

" You must show me," said Elvorden, with the air of a Royalty who visits an aged cottager skilled in the art of making felt bouquets out of old carpet slippers, " I'm all agog."

" I'll show you when Uncle Tom's too soused to rebuke me." He glanced back at Glaiden who was gulping down, at speed, a final pint of beer. " Poor brute, he'll take a drop too much one fine day, and then —— "

" Bowler hat," Elvorden sighed.

" Girls," said Lilley, " are safer."

The officers went always to the Golden Fleece, but for the greater part the men went there only when they were flush, or when there was some general excitement that affected the whole battery. Tawney spent his evenings at the Fleece for the sake of seeing Gillian Eagles, and Dakin for the sake of recapturing a sense of the social superiority he fancied he had lost.

The lounge was large and rather draughty. There were black and chromium chairs, settees upholstered in bright green leather. The ashtrays were heavy ones of green glass, the black-out curtains patterned in green and orange. On the wide mantelshelf was a model, in pink plaster stippled with gold, of a girl dancing. One of her breasts had crumbled at the tip and Gillie had tried to mend it with sealing wax. In an alcove between the windows stood a great radiogram that knew no peace.

Sam Eagles stayed behind the bar and seldom left it. He was a fat, grey man hugely tall, with a sad, dull face set smally in an enormous head. On one of the few occasions when he had ever spoken about himself he had told Strutt that he could never find a hat to fit him. ' So I never wear one, though I envied you, I feel the cold as much as anyone else. I feel it cruel.'

Gillian, his wife, was twenty-eight, her husband's junior by a score of years. She was very thin and would have had no visible breasts had she not hauled them up in a silken pulley and stretched over them tight, high-necked woollen

jerseys in blues and yellows and greens. She wore these colours because her hair was red ; it was remarkably bright, so curling, so crisp that it set a spectral mist above her childishly-bulging forehead. Her features were small and aquiline, her mouth as softly curved as a rest in music horizontally printed. A promising, persuasive mouth ; but her eyes, large, grey and very slightly protuberant, were cold as stones.

She moved about the lounge, gathering up glasses, teasing her favourites, noting with a royal eye any variegation in a man's usual appearance. "New tie. Extravagance!"—and again, "Put your parting back on the side, Mac. You look too good to be true." She paused to speak to Elvorden, stood leaning against the fireplace, her fine-boned arm gracefully disposed along the shelf. A charm bracelet, dangling low from her wrist, reflected the flames in the little shapes of metal.

He smiled at her, put out his forefinger to touch the new adornment. "Pretty."

"I was hoping you'd notice. It's my birthday present."

"From whom? Sam?"

She pouted, set her head a little on one side and darted a glance at him. "That the best you can do? I bet you were bad at school, got all the answers wrong."

"Well, who was it, then.?"

"Shan't tell you. A gift from a grateful client : will that do?"

Victor Tawney, who had been within earshot, moved out of it and put a record on the radiogram. The voice swelled up, conquering the noise of the room.

Ma mamma done tole meee . .
When Ah was in knee-paants . .
Ma mamma done tole me,
Son . . . . .

Gillie said, "There! A song for you. 'When you were in knee-pants.' Not so long ago, eh?"

"But I'm a big boy now."

She stared into his dark-blue, unshadowed eyes through which peered out a well-fed, well-nursemaided child.

"Maybe. What's your first name? Mind me asking?"

"Ives."

"Funny one, isn't it? But I like it. May I call you by it?"

"If you'll tell me who gave you the dingle-dangles."

"Mister Elvorden, you can keep your silly name. Oh, hullo, Clifford!" She turned to greet Clifford Toller, who had just come up to the fire, grunting and shivering, stretching blotched hands to the heat. He was forty, the oldest man in the Battery, excepting Cameron-Leckie. He had been an unsuccessful Territorial for eighteen years.

"Hullo, m'dear. You look pretty. Aren't you drinking? Isn't this pup looking after you? What'll you have?"

"Sweet of you. A bitter, please."

"She wouldn't take one from me."

"I wouldn't! You didn't ask me."

"I knew by your mood you wouldn't. Didn't you turn me down last night?"

Smiling from one to the other of the men, she was as pretty, as rosy, as a young girl plagued by partners at her first dance.

Sam Eagles called to her in his high, dead voice, "Lend a hand here, will you, Gillie?"

Shrugging, she returned to the bar, ducked under the counterflap and emerged with a professional smile that seemed to have been painted upon her face during the second's retirement. "Who's first?"

"I am," said Philip Strutt, "and if I'm not I deserve to be. Been out all day, only just come in. Scotch and splash, please."

"No Scotch. Only Irish."

"Irish, then."

"Soda or water?"

"Soda."

"You shouldn't drink soda with Irish," said Pickering, "it's all wrong. Ruins the whisky. Mrs. Eagles, same again, please. Hullo, Cassilis. Have a drink. Same for Mr. Cassilis, please. Well, how did the discussion go?"

"Only so-so. We had a sticky beginning, but it warmed up towards the end. The men don't always like to speak up on political subjects." Cassilis looked worried; an indifferent performance on his own part always distressed him. "Don't fancy my opening remarks were too inspiring."

"What was the subject?" Strutt enquired. He turned round to look at the opening door, turned back again to the bar.

"'Could the present war have been avoided?' You'd be surprised how quickly it got around to the Second Front. I couldn't hold it back."

Pickering laughed, said, "My suggestion, I'm afraid. Anyhow, the B.C. doesn't like too much controversial stuff, so it will probably be the last discussion of its kind for the time being." He said to Strutt, "Good show of yours to-day."

Strutt went faintly pink. "Thank you."

"I say, wasn't your wife coming down to-night?"

"Well, I'm waiting for her. I thought she'd have got here by now. What time does the last bus get in?"

Gillie interrupted them, biting her lip like a naughty little girl. "Oh, Mr. Strutt, don't be cross with me! I should have told you. A telegram came for you."

Annoyed, he said sharply, "When?"

"Oh, only half an hour ago. Not a minute longer, I swear. It was only half an hour, wasn't it, Sambo?"

Sam Eagles grunted unintelligibly.

"There, you see, Sambo says it wasn't longer!" Gillie shook her curls till they shimmered, stamped her foot. "Mr. Strutt, you *are* cross! Now don't be, please. We've had such an awful rush in here to-night that it went out of my mind."

Strutt said tightly, "If I could have it right now, please, it would be nice for me."

She drew the envelope from behind a row of bottles and handed it to him. He read the telegram, tore it up and put the pieces into his pocket.

"Not bad news?" Pickering asked gently.

"Oh, no. Only that my wife won't be down till after lunch to-morrow. She has to work."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Gillie tugged at Strutt's sleeve. "Never mind, have a drink with me. Just to show you've forgiven and forgotten."

"Thanks, but I can't stay." He nodded to Pickering and left the lounge.

Sam muttered disagreeably to his wife, who hunched her shoulders, fanned out her pretty hands and turned to attend to Tawney, who was tinkling his glass on the bar.

"Yes?"

"Same again, please." He lowered his voice. "Gillie. I want six dances to-morrow night."

"Not sure I'm coming."

"Horsefeathers. You won't be busy here. Everyone will be at the dance."

"I still don't know. Depends on Sam."

"As if you care a curse what Sam thinks."

She stared at him bitterly, slapped down a glass. "One and three."

"Gillie. Don't be nasty. You wouldn't be wearing that kedoodlum if you hated me, would you?"

"I don't know what you mean." Unclasping the bracelet, she slipped it into her pocket. "Good-evening, Major."

"Hullo, Mrs. Eagles. You're nice and warm in here."

"Well, we simply had to have a fire to-day. It's freezing. What can I get you?"

Tawney whispered, "Come and play darts with me. Sam can cope all right."

"No, thanks."

"Please. Darling, please."

The radiogram roared on.

Amapola
My pretty little poppy

"Shut up, you fool."

"Gillie ——"

Tom Glaiden wandered down the room, glass in hand. "Mrs. Sam! Come and play Shove Ha'penny with Lilley and me."

"All right," she answered gaily and at once. "Sambo, you can manage now, can't you?" She came through the bar, placed herself between the men as if under escort. "Forward march!"

"You're looking beautiful," said Lilley.

"You've kissed the blarney-stone. Where's Clifford? Hi, Clifford! Come and play."

He shook his head. "Got to go now."

"You, Saint Ives!"

Lilley said, "God, I must be losing my grip. I never thought of that. Elvorden, did you hear what the lady called you?"

"The lady is impertinent," Elvorden murmured. "Nevertheless, I will sport with her. Go on, Gillie, you first."

Standing among the three men she was a miracle of conscious beauty, her voice high, her face brilliant with animation. A lucky night for her. Three officers. Sometimes it had to be Tawney, or even Dakin. Something the matter with Tawney, or he'd have a commission. Had been to a good school: Gillie knew. She could fit her clients exactly into the delicate gradations of the social scale. Sweller than Lilley, much; sweller than Glaiden. Same sort of background as Elvorden, or the Major—though Elvorden's sweller than the Major, really. Sweller than Strutt. Can't be sure about Blanco Pickering, because he used to be arty and you never can tell with *them*.

Gillie made a pretence of spitting on her palms, rolled her eyes ceilingwards. She said, "Oh, Lawdy, Lawdy, send me de luck dis night!"

Tawney went out, swinging the door so violently that it swept a gust of cold sweet air into the hot room. Outside the Fleece, waiting by the bridge beneath which the water ran swift, chill and silver, Eily Fogg waited to watch him pass.

CHAPTER II

CIVILIANS

THE DEATH of a lover is the only irrevocable end of love. Other ways of loss leave still the illusion, the fantasy, to fret the proud flesh of hope. When Cecil Archer died Pickering tried to draw her up, as Proserpine, from the shades by revisiting the country where, as a child, he had first met her; where, as a child, he had lived in the unsettling glory of expatriation with Richard, his father, and Helena, his step-mother. When war broke out he was in Bruges, scuffling the lime-leaves strewn about the autumn quays, hoping for nothing, waiting for nothing, unless it were for his lost girl. And she did not come. He lingered for a while in the dead city, using memory for incantation: here I had my boat, here I sat with Georges and Berthe, hearing the sound of the bells under the water, here I hid from Helena when she ran, trollish in her fury, in search

of me. Here I listened to her while, being in good humour, she sang an old song, her eyes black as coal in the shadows of her wild, dyed hair. There, above the lake, I saw in a dream the likeness of Cecil, her violet dress flickering like a great wing among the trees. She was here, but now she is gone : for she is dead.

And so one morning he awoke to find the vision departed, the magic dead and rancid. The bells no longer rang in the tower, the ghosts had left the streets to make way for the soldiers. Here I am, said Pickering, making a fool of myself in a world at war. I am ashamed.

Before he left Bruges he went to the Mèmling Museum to see, for the last time, the serene triptyque ; but it had been stored away for fear of bombing.

A week later he went to the house in Hans Crescent where Helena lived with her husband Dan Archer, Cecil's father, who was now the holder of a business knighthood.

" Helena," he said, " I think I'll go for a soldier."

She stared at him thoughtfully, stretching out her forefinger to flick up the light, short hair at the nape of his neck. She was, these days, a remarkable woman. Indeed, she had always been so ; but now she was remarkable in a different fashion. To fit herself for Archer's home she had disguised her raffish splendour in dark dresses, had made the coiffeur bleach her hair that the abandonment of the yellow dye might not produce too absurd a metamorphosis, had bridled her sharp tongue so rigorously that she was beginning to forget how serviceable a weapon she had once found it. Only with Pickering did she allow to appear some trace of the old, roaring Helena, the woman whom, as his father's mistress, he had hated and with whom, as his father's widow, he had come to find kinship.

" You would be a tomfool," she said slowly. " How old are you now ? I can never keep track of you. Thirty-one ? Two ? "

" Thirty-one "

" Well, they won't be calling you up for ages, and anyway, Dan can probably get you a job that reserves you."

" I don't doubt it. No takers, Helena."

" Now listen, don't you do anything rash." Dropping to her knees, she began to fuss at the flowers banked in the empty hearth. " You've got your pictures to write

about, and I dare say you might even find some job in connection with them, if you tried."

"I've been offered it. Crandell wrote the other day, offering me work connected with the storing of paintings for the duration."

"Well, then, what's the matter with you?" Rising heavily, one hand on his knee, she reseated herself, solid as one of those early Italian madonnas which, she had once remarked, 'were painted sitting on hall-stands.' "Come on, out with it. Soldiering's not your line."

He looked at a photograph of Cecil that stood between a lamp and a vase of fleshy white roses. The petal-shadows fell across her thin bright face, were lost in the heavy darkness of her hair which she had worn chopped eccentrically into a thickly-curling fringe across her wide forehead.

"Is that it?" said Helena sharply, "Nothing left to you but death? She'd have thought you an idiot for that."

He murmured, "No, it isn't that. You've been reading shockers. Cecil's got something to do with it, I admit; since she died I've felt there was nothing much left in the world to do, or to enjoy. Nothing to keep me busy. Soldiering might do that, you know, and anyhow, I may just as well join up now as later."

For a moment she said nothing. Then she asked him slyly, "Will you go back to Bruges when the war's over?"

"I don't think I shall ever go there again."

"How extremely weak and silly of you!" she exclaimed, with tart triumph.

"Perhaps you're right. Yes, of course I shall go back; but to there, next time, as to any other place."

"I always thought it was a mucky old town," said Helena. She heard a footfall outside and her face sharpened, subtly changed. "Well, my dear," she added, in the voice she had made for Archer's hearing and which had now become more natural to her than the voice Pickering had known since boyhood, "don't do anything rash. There's plenty of time left for thinking."

Charmian, Helena's daughter and Pickering's half-sister, came into the room. She was seventeen, a tall, light girl wearing a dress just a little too old for her. "Hullo, Claud! When did you get back? She came to him, affectionately touched his cheek.

"Last night. How are you, Charm?"

"Very well. Like my dress?"

"A bit mature, perhaps?"

"Nonsense. Everyone wears things like this."

"Good reason for you not doing so. But I didn't say I didn't like it. You look very nice and very noble."

She spun round before him, the skirt wheeling about her childish legs, sat down when she was giddy, and raked a cigarette from the mantelshelf. "I haven't seen you for such a time! Tell me all about you, and how Bruges is looking."

"He wants to join the army," said Helena drily.

Charmian opened her gold-flecked eyes. "Why?"

"There's a *war* on," he mocked her.

"Oh, I know. Don't I just know! I've been trying to get something to do, but I seem to be too young for anyone to bother with. Do you really mean it?"

He nodded.

She said, her voice faintly sardonic, "Daniel could pull some strings for you, I expect. He seems to know everybody, especially now he's come out of retirement to make tanks. He could get you a commission."

"Yes, I bet he could; but you see, I fancy the Artillery, and they like you to have a few months in the ranks before you go to the O.C.T.U."

Helena was annoyed. "You don't mean to say you're going to be a Tommy? Don't tell me you're having socialistic ideas again, because I simply can't stand it."

He replied rather wearily, "No ideas, except that I want to get into artillery because I like head-work and I'm not young enough to enjoy tearing round like a maniac in the Infantry. And I'm not being snooty. If any of Dan's colonels can give me a boost when I've served my time in the ranks I'll thank him abundantly."

Charmian was doubtful. "I've heard you have to be good at figures for artillery. You weren't very good, were you?"

"I shall stick at them till I am. Anyway, I might find an easy branch of it, if there are any easy branches."

Helena rose. "Well, think first and you won't have to worry afterwards. Dan will think you're mad."

"But he'll help me if I need him, won't he? You'll see to it that he does."

"I have no influence upon Dan," said Helena, "he does as he sees fit." Her gaze met Pickering's. Her mouth flickered, her eyes reflected an inner light.

"Oh, no influence at all," he agreed elaborately, "not a jot. We all know that."

The old Helena was lost once again in the new. "Of course I shall speak to him," she said, and went out of the room.

"Fancy old Claud in khaki," Charmian mused, sitting on the fireside stool and sliding her arm through his. She added, "I am so glad you're back, you know!" and kissed him. "I say"—her voice was uncomfortably shrewd—"are you just going to be a soldier because you want something to do, or do you really want to fight Hitler?"

"Let's say there's nobody I'd rather fight. Put it that way." He pulled at the great knot of hair that lay upon her small, grooved neck. "How's Roy?"

"He's joining up. He'll have to pretty soon, anyway. I wish I could marry him first."

"Helena won't let you?"

"Mother says it's idiotic at my age. What do you think?"

"Oh, I never think the sensible thing. I'd let you marry him to-morrow, with half a dozen bridesmaids and service fully choral. You'd be very happy for a couple of years and might even find you went on liking each other after that."

"I shall always love Roy," she told him gravely.

He did not smile. "Yes, I dare say you always will. Why shouldn't you? I hate Dismal Jimmies who always expect a crash." He thought of his own crash, of his wife Meg from whom, in the end, he had parted because the image of Cecil, living or dead, had made all other images unimportant and stale. "Remember me to Roy when you see him."

"I really do think you are *excellent*," said Charmian, in a sudden energy of appreciation.

Pickering, as he had planned, joined the Royal Artillery and was sent to a training regiment in the south. He was happy enough, glad to be free of the responsibility for ordering his own life, glad to be forced into taking the physical exercise for which, left to himself, he would have had no desire whatsoever. His only complaint was that the collar of his battle-dress chafed his neck, 'and for that

reason,' he wrote to Helena, ' I shall try to become an officer as early as possible. I can at least get a shirt-collar between it and me and be wholly comfortable in the evenings.'

After a few cold and dismal months with a coastal defence battery he was recommended for a commission. He went to O.C.T.U. where, thanks mainly to arduous evenings spent in the Norfolk gunpit with an arithmetic book and a Baker and Bourne algebra, he succeeded in passing out with a B grading. He had worked hard ; if he were never spectacular he was, at least, never foolish, and when he put on his new stiff uniform for the first time took much pride in having had no recourse to the influence of any of Archer's friends.

Archer did, however, play his part. Shortly after receiving his second pip Pickering came home on leave and at Hans Crescent met Humphrey Brackett, colonel of a regiment stationed in Kent. Brackett, in peace-time, collected paintings ; they were, for the most part, poor ones or ones of doubtful authenticity, but Pickering, when he visited his chambers, saw no need to tell him so.

" I'm forming a new Anti-Tank regiment. Would you like to come in it ? " said the Colonel in a tone slightly jocular, slightly withdrawn, as if (Pickering afterwards remarked to Charmian) his next words would be, ' You would ? Well, you shan't.'

" Very much, sir."

" See what can be done. No promises, mind."

Shortly after this meeting, Pickering was posted to Brackett's regiment and in the spring of 1942 was given his captaincy. He proved an excellent Battery Captain. The B.C., a suspicious man who at first was dubious about all his officers, and more especially about those admired by Brackett, came to like him and upon occasion called him by his Christian name.

The regiment spent the summer under canvas on the hills outside Strethamfold, and at the beginning of October moved into winter quarters at Christenhurst, where the officers' mess was established in a house that had until the outbreak of war been used as a museum to house the collection of a local maniac whose interest had been in musical-boxes and instruments of torture.

" Yes, it surprises me, too," Pickering wrote to Helena,

" that I should be all beautiful with three pips on my tunic. Why am I a success ? (' They laughed when I sat down to play, but after six easy lessons . .'). Simply, because I work hard and have a wretched stomach for drink. Simply because, though I do little that is conspicuously right, I do nothing conspicuously wrong. Simply, because I have no interests save in the army. Simply, because I like to see things tidy about me and therefore make no messes. Simply, because it gives me pleasure to do well in a life for which I would seem so little fitted. Simply, because I think how much it would have made Cecil laugh to see what a dull military dog I am now. I have grown a moustache, but it is so fair as to be almost invisible. Satisfied ? My love to you all."

. . . . . .

" Hullo, soldier," said Eily Fogg in her high, shy voice.

Sidney Mangan, leaving the Checkers at Strethamfold for the wooded lane that led back to the camp, saw her standing in the full flood of the moon, her tiny, triangular face up-tilted, her small eyes glittering like sequins. As she moved towards him she smoothed the fair hair tightly rolled above her forehead, adjusted a short coat of imitation fur.

" Hullo, Titch," said Mangan.

" Out for a walk ? "

" Not me. Where's your eyes ? I'm flying around in a Zeppelin."

She giggled, put her hand to her mouth.

" Kidder ! "

" Serious as a judge." He looked at her keenly. " Where's your pram, run away downhill ? "

" What pram ? "

" One they wheeled you up here in."

" Oh, you ! " She stamped her foot, then pointed to it.

Mangan squatted on his haunches, looked at the high shoe adorned with a bow of patent leather. " So what ? Got a corn ? "

" Silly. Like my anklet ? "

The moonlight glimmered on the little chain.

Mangan sighed and straightened himself. " Why don't you wear it round both feet ? Nighty-night."

" Why ? Why both feet ? "

" Keep you at home."

Eily pouted, swung her lean hips. "Not much of a gentleman, are you?"

"Look here." His voice was sharp. "How old are you?"

"You don't ask a lady things like that."

"I'm not asking a lady. I'm asking a Titch."

She gave him a glance of anger and fright, and ran suddenly away past the Checkers in the direction of Wickfield Cottages. Mangan looked after her for a moment, took a decision, and followed. "You. You, Garbo. Stop."

"What do you want? You're a beast."

"What's your name?"

Silence.

"Now look," he wheedled, "how shall I ever be able to ask you out to tea if I don't know your name?"

She was beguiled. "All right. It's Eily. Eileen Fogg."

"Oh. Good. Well, I'll tell the boys who not to watch out for. You get back to your ma, Eily. Nobody's going to play nooky in the bushes with you, if you think they are. Off with you."

Sidney Mangan strode away downhill.

Eily felt the tears stinging the back of her nose. She shook with anger and humiliation, repeated to herself two very bad words which she reserved for emergencies only. She knew the meaning of neither, but the sound was satisfactory.

Chris Dakin and Victor Tawney came strolling along the road, singing with English cheerlessness.

> "Bless 'em all,
> Bless 'em all,
> The long and the short and the tall . . ."

"Hullo, soldiers," said Eily.

"Hullo," said Tawney. His tenor voice continued, solo,

> "You'll get no promotion
> This side of the ocean,
> So . . ."

"Good-evening," Dakin murmured politely, and stopped.

Eily appraised him, his shambling body, his long, eager face, the crust of tightly waving hair beneath his side-cap.

"Oh, come on, Chris. No fun and games to-night. Goodbye, mademoiselle."

Eily turned her attention to Tawney and was made shy by admiration. He was very handsome, like Tyrone Power. No, the other fellow, the one in the film last week. No, even better. And a beautiful voice. All sorts of people were ordinary soldiers. Perhaps he was someone with a title who had gone into the ranks because of some mystery. He would fall in love with her and marry her, like the rich boy did to the factory girl in the magazine Auntie bought.

"Here," said Dakin, "you talk to me, not to him. He doesn't like girls."

"I like big girls," Tawney replied. "If you're coming, Chris, buck up about it. If you're not, a very good night to you and watch your step." He touched his brow to Eily, smiling at her so pleasantly that her heart moved in her breast; and he went off towards the lane.

"Who's he?" Eily asked.

"What do you want to know that for? He's gone, but I'm here. My name's Chris."

"Yes, but who is he?" She added craftily, "He's like someone I know."

"Come for a walk with me and I'll tell you."

She abandoned hope of Tawney. After all, Chris is quite a nice-looking fellow. I like fair boys. He speaks nice, too. She smiled up at him, not noticing, in her own delighted nervousness, that he, too, was nervous, that his lips were twitching and his eyes over-brilliant.

"Well, only for half an hour," said Eily. "I can't be long, or my auntie will be mad."

They went into Sandley Wood, sat in a clearing under the deathly whiteness of the moon and kissed each other many times. Eily liked Chris and was excellently pleased with herself. He was indeed a nice fellow, gentle, not fast. The sort you could feel was your baby.

When she had left him her pride rose like the sea. I knew I could do it, could get a chap. Maybe the other will like me next time; Vic, Chris said he was. Victor is a swell name. I'll marry a soldier one day, perhaps even an officer if Vic got to be one. She ran all the way home, reaching there breathless and trembling. Can't let Auntie see me like this. Skirting the cottage by way of the garden, she climbed on to the waterbutt, pushed up the kitchen sash and climbed into the silvered room. Listened. No sound

of Auntie. Eily sluiced her face under the tap and wiped it on her handkerchief, so that no trace of lipstick should appear on the towel, took off the ankle-chain and dragged her hair down from the crown of her head on to her shoulders. Then she saw herself in the cracked mirror, a thin child whitewashed by the moon, a little ghost in a camera of shadow. Overcome by the excitement, the triumph of the night, by its unfamiliar scents—the sugary sweetness of his breath so warm upon her lips, the smell of his tunic, the heady exhalations of the rotting leaves—she burst into tears.

In a little while, when she felt calmer, a little further removed from fear, she went into the sitting-room where her aunt, a large slattern in a dressing-gown, was sitting by the sewing-machine, on the lid of which she had spread her cards. Gladys Fogg turned round, twitching her long plait over her shoulder. She liked to wear her hair down while she was in the house because the weight of it made her head ache.

"Where've you been? Know what time it is?"

Eily replied impudently, "No, and you don't either, because the clock's stopped."

"Must be well after ten. If you don't get in earlier I'll send you back to your ma, I will, with a flea in your ear. Come on, where?"

"Where what?"

"You know. Where've you been?"

"Out with Lucy Wayman. For a walk. Anything wrong with that?"

"If any of them soldiers ever talk to you, you hop it quick. Do they ever?"

"I should say not. Auntie, can I have some cocoa?"

"If you get it yourself. I could do with a cup, too." Gladys ran her thick, spatulate fingers over the cards. "Come here, Eil, and let's see what I've got. King of Hearts. That's your uncle. Now then, where am I? That's me. Queen of Clubs. The cards say he's coming home."

"They don't send them home when they go out East."

"Hope they don't. If he came back here, drunken beast, I'd throw him through the door. Let your Ma have him. She always backed him up."

"Ma likes her own drop," Eily muttered, and her face was contracted by the force of an unchildlike emotion.

Gladys put an arm about her, squeezing her closely to her own body. "Like your Auntie, don't you? Don't always nag, nag, nag at you, do she? Well, you're all right. You're a good girl. Does you good to stand on your own feet and not have your elders chasing after you . . . Go on, get the cocoa. The tin's on the top shelf." When Eily came back with the tray Gladys added, "Well, and how was Her Majesty this morning?"

"Oh, in an awful wax, making out as if I ought to have six hands. I was of a muck sweat by the time I got off." Eily worked two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon for the wife of the landlord at the Pigeons. "She was swanking round in a house-coat, as she called it, bright pink. Bought it in Sevenoaks. Suppose I told her what an old sausage she looked! Can't you just see her face?"

"Never mind," said Gladys, pouncing on a card and slapping it upwards, "better times coming. This is you. See yourself? Change coming soon. Looks as if you're going to get a posh place."

Eily sighed, "I might get married."

Gladys laughed, shooting out her foot to stamp on a running spider. "Not for some time you can't, because the law won't let you."

"Not such a very long time." With her spoon Eily lifted a tent of skin from the cocoa and wiped it on the underside of a mat on which stood the oil lamp that for years had blackened the low ceiling with its smoke.

"You dirty girl, making the place a pig-sty! Well, you just marry a millionaire then, and buy your old auntie a bit of comfort in her old age . . Death card! Not mine, though. And not—no, it's not yours." Gladys glanced sidelong at the girl, swept up the cards and thrust them into the drawer where the spools and cottons were kept. "Don't know whose it could be. Look sharp now, bed for you. What would your Ma say if she knew the late hours you kept?"

"We won't tell her," Eily answered, her face gleaming in childish conspiracy, "no, we won't tell her. We don't tell her everything, do we?"

Victor Tawney, at the age of two, had the misfortune to suffer from weak ankles. In consequence of this he was very slow in learning to walk, and in the company of contem-

poraries skilled in this art was given to fits of temper. Nevertheless, no one could say he was not a trier. As soon as he was sufficiently sure of himself to stagger unsupported from the fireplace to the grand piano he began to practise climbing. To witness his attempts was pitiful, for he fell again and again from all manner of elevations, recovering himself, bruised, yet doggedly silent, to make a fresh essay. His father and mother followed him around in affectionate irritation and at last, unable to endure the spectacle of such vain and gloomy endeavour, ran to help him the moment he set foot on the rung of a chair or the ledge of a bookcase.

"Oh, dear," Mary Tawney would cry, half-laughing and half-crying, "he'll *never* do it all by himself!"

In their own childhood, both parents had been prodigies. By the age of five, Kenrick had read the *Arabian Nights* from cover to cover. At six, Mary had written a song with ten notes in the treble and four in the bass. Victor showed no signs of any talent, said not a single word until he was three and flung picture-books at whosoever attempted to show them to him. At six, however, he could read simple stories, if the words were broken up with hyphens into single syllables. In due course he became a schoolboy and brought back from his preparatory school (a day establishment for delicate or slightly backward children) a certain amount of homework. Mary and Kenrick insisted upon helping him with it. "But darling," Mary would protest, "you'll never do it all by yourself!"

Victor went to the public school that had been honoured by generations of Tawneys and there he made, if not a brilliant, a reasonable showing, revealing some aptitude for writing plays. During one vacation he was commissioned to write a poetic drama for performance next term by the fifth form. Kenrick decided to knock it into shape. "But look here, old man," he said, "this is a stiff assignment. You'll never do it all by yourself!" The play was finished by the stipulated time. Kenrick had touched up the second and third act curtains and added a delightfully witty Chorus. Mary had suggested the fantastic trial scene in act four. The performance was successful and Victor was much praised; yet oddly enough, he never again showed the slightest interest in writing plays.

When Victor left school he went to the University, where he

achieved a very modest law degree, and when he came down his parents began to discuss the question of his career. It was plain, Mary said (there were, at that time, only three women barristers in England whose earnings ran into four figures, and she was one of them) that he would never set the Temple on fire. It was equally plain, said Kenrick, half his attention engaged by the proofs of a whimsical essay on the subject of successful parenthood, that he had not inherited the family talent for journalism, and that none of his father's Fleet Street contacts would be helpful to him.

"All the same," Mary mused, "he has *got* a degree, of a sort. I think he'd better go into a solicitor's office. I'll send him round to see old Pargiter."

"Better," said Kenrick, deleting a comma, "if you had a talk with Pargiter yourself first, and explained the situation. You couldn't expect the boy to do it all by himself."

Victor had been with Pargiter eight months when war broke out, and to his parents' surprise he did not wait to be called up.

After a month or so in the ranks he was asked whether he wished to apply for a commission. "Oh, yes," said Victor agreeably, ever anxious to please, though he felt he might miss the men he had come to know so well. They were good fellows and he felt at home with them; also they were his own friends, friends that his parents were never likely to meet.

He was sent to an Anti-Aircraft O.C.T.U. where he found, to his distress, that he was visited by all the unease of a boy at school with all the horrors of the classroom before him once again. He had not been there two months before he was quite certain that he would be no good. One day there was a written examination, and before him was set a sheet printed with the silhouettes of many kinds of aircraft, all of which he was expected to name. He heard his mother's voice, saw upon the paper the shadow of his father's guiding hand, so white, so competent; yet the voice did not tell him which was a twin-engined Hudson, and the shadow was a mist still further obscuring the shapes of sharks and sausages and flying fish. He looked at the ceiling, at the khaki back of the cadet in front of him, at the smear of ink upon his own thumbnail; and he said to God, You can't

expect me to do this all by myself? But apparently God did.

Victor Tawney was returned to the ranks where he was perfectly happy until, there being a shortage of Anti-Tank officers, he was persuaded by a lieutenant who could not leave well alone to try his luck again.

This time he forced himself through four months out of a five months' course, and had even ordered his uniform; which was returnable, happily, in the event of an accident. Mary wrote to him, "My dear lad, your father and I are so surprised! We think you've been magnificent, and shall throw the most terrific party for you when you pass out."

It was the weekly custom of this training regiment to arrange a drill order, an elaborate deployment of guns over the surrounding countryside, at which each cadet was given some specific rôle ranging from Battery Commander to batman. Victor, up till now, had been fortunate, having secured no part more important in these dramas than that of despatch rider. This time, however, he was made a Troop Commander and was expected to place four small guns in a vast area of space.

It was a bleak day. The high wind blew sand and smoke all over the Plain, and a glutinous black slush lay between the tussocks of grass, making every slope treacherous. Victor, having been delivered at dawn to his troop headquarters by a cynical cadet who, posing comfortably as a driver, was merry with prophesies of ruin and disgrace, applied himself once more to the map which had appeared, fantastically altered in each manifestation, all through the bad dreams of the preceding night. He found it had lost none of the nightmare quality, was to him as meaningless as a sheet of Chinese characters. Nor did it seem to bear the slightest relation to the grey and hopeless convolutions of the Plain. The blood rose in his cheeks, shot up behind his ears like the alcohol in a thermometer. The troop sergeant, played by a blond and efficient lordling not so long out of school, patiently awaited orders.

Victor murmured, "For God's sake, Tenniel, suggest something. My brain's gone dead. I can't think."

Tenniel whispered in agony, "I can't. Look out, Hayter's coming."

Hayter, the officer in charge of training, came smiling

out of the blown smoke, the streaming frosts of morning. "All O.K. here, Tawney?" He stood at Victor's shoulder, waiting, listening.

Victor, in an agony of utter paralysis, gazed from Tenniel to Hayter, from Hayter to the unresponsive sky. A mystic duet of voices, the one high and sweet, the other low, mild and whimsical, was born upon the nipping gale. You can't expect him to do it *all* by himself.

No, no, you can't expect me . . .

Victor realised with a shock that time had passed. Feebly tentatively, he touched the map. "I thought one gun there, by the bridge, and perhaps we might put another . ."

"Yes?" said Hayter. He was no longer smiling.

When Victor was returned for the second time to the ranks, the strain, the fret of the past months fell off him like the chains of a manumitted slave. Posted to a regiment at Strethamfold, in Kent, he found friends as varied, as rich as any he had previously known in the army. So happy was he in their company that he was not even abashed, for more than half a day at a time, by the letters of brave and affectionate disappointment sent him by his parents. The ranks, he thought, are Heaven. No decisions to take. The comradeship of men who are not eternally watching their step in case they drop bricks, men who are free to be wild men, model men, stodges or eccentrics just as they please. Not men self-soothed into anonymity for the sake of the Colonel's opinion. He never regretted his failure to take a commission until the Battery moved to Christenhurst, and he fell in love with Gillian Eagles.

When the Blake-Sieviers of Bellenger Wood found that their cousin, Mrs. Marriott, was ruined (that is, she was reduced to a nett income of eight hundred pounds a year) they suggested that she should come to live at the lodge. She moved in with her three-year old daughter, her elderly maid, and a nursemaid for the child. Gillian Cayley was, Mrs. Marriott considered, a find; having been for six months probationer at a children's hospital from which she had been induced at last to retire owing to her lack of nursing vocation, she coupled considerable experience with a comforting lack of diplomas, thereby being far less expensive and fussy than a woman made proud by training. Gillian

was pretty, she was gay, she was reasonably competent, and the child seemed to like her. For a Londoner born and bred, she settled down very well to a country life.

Soon she found two admirers: Sam Eagles, head keeper on the estate, and Kevin, the Blake-Sieviers' only son. She paid no attention whatsoever to Sam, who was elderly, dull and as ridiculous as are most middle-aged men who come late to the experience of falling in love, until Kevin went to Spain with a party of friends to see how General Franco was faring in the pacification of the territory he had won to date; and then she let Sam take her out because she was extremely worried and needed distraction. She was aching for Kevin's return, feeding herself upon the remembrance of his words: 'Oh, don't be an ass, Gillie, nothing's going to go wrong; and if it did I'd marry you. Cross my heart.'

Then Kevin was killed by a Republican shell, having, in a fit of desire to emulate a friend who was acting as war correspondent for a British pro-Franco weekly, wandered too near to the General's front lines.

When Gillian heard the news she neither wept nor fainted, but went down to Sam's cottage and there, standing before his fire, her out-thrust hands turned into red glass by the flames, told him the whole story.

Being an observant man, he was not surprised: he was only happy. But steady now, said Sam to himself. Go easy. Don't rush her.

Stolidly he made tea, as stolidly refrained from saying a word until her tears, which she had hoarded for the crisis, had fallen and had been wiped away.

"I'll have to tell her," Gillie muttered, "tell Mrs. B.-S. He would have married me, I know it. I'd have been her daughter-in-law. Why shouldn't she help me now? It's not my fault he died."

Sam persuaded her to keep her mouth shut. What good would it do her? She hadn't a ha'porth of proof of Kevin's good intentions. All she'd get would be the sack and the ruin of her reputation. "You wait," he said, "and I'll put my thinking-cap on. We'll get you out of it somehow. Trust Sam."

Characteristically, he did not ask her to marry him till three days later; and during the intervening period Gillie nearly lost her mind with rage, worry and fear. Consequently

she accepted his offer with a greater appearance of gratitude than she would have shown had he made it immediately he learned of her trouble.

"And you won't have to stick around here," he told her, "because I'm going to set up on my own. Surprised? I'm a saving man. All my life I've saved. Like to be Mine Host's wife? I've bought the Golden Fleece at Christenhurst. Old Sievier knows. I'm leaving here at the end of the month and you can come with me, so nobody need guess anything, need they?"

She kissed him, her face gentle with tears, the red hair disordered about her flushed forehead. "Sambo, there aren't any thanks I can make, except by promising you'll never be sorry. I'll love you, Sam. I'll be a wife in a million."

She was good enough four months after the wedding, when Kevin's child miscarried, not to wreak upon her husband her fury that she should have been so tricked into marrying him. As for Sam, he was content; it was far better that there should be no living reproach to Gillie, no reminder that she had ever been anything but Sam's good girl.

In 1940, to his joy, she bore him a son of his own. It had been deliberately conceived in order that she should not be called up for war-work. Michael was a pretty baby and she was, for a while, quite fond of him; though, as she said, she seemed to have no natural gifts for being a Mamma. She hated breast-feeding and abandoned it after a month. When he was a year old she boasted to a friend who asked her if she found it difficult to get the right food for a baby in war time, 'Oh, he has what we have.' Michael became, as the months went on, less pretty and rather subject to spots.

When Gillie registered for National Service she testified that she had a child of under fourteen living with her. This was, however, not the case; for she had sent Michael to live with Sam's sister at Strethamfold. She explained, "I'm so run off my feet, what with Sambo unable to get an ounce of help, that it's not fair for me to have Baby at the Fleece. It breaks my heart being parted from him, but he must be the first consideration."

Until the arrival of the Battery the Fleece had not been a busy house, though it still catered for a good many tra-

vellers with business in that part of the county; and there were times when Gillie thought she would go crazy. Sam was so slow, so old, so common. He knew it, too. He was impressed because her father had worked in a government office, and when he wanted to be unpleasant called her 'Your Ladyship.' She hated him when he was uxorious, but hated him worse when, after the Battery had spent its first fortnight in the village, he suddenly ceased to be.

All right, Gillie thought, If you don't care what I do, I'll see I have some fun. I need some fun. I'm young and men like me. And one day the war must end and I'll be alone with Sam for ever and ever, so why shouldn't I enjoy myself now? Besides, I do give the boys a good time, and that's war-work, in a way. And there's no harm in it, nothing to hurt Sam.

But then she came to know Lilley, and Elvorden, and Toller (the last-named frankly and recklessly in love with her) and she began to wonder whether, after all, there might not be some future escape from Sam. If I were free I could marry whom I pleased.

Free?

The thought glowed at the back of her mind, a spindling, consoling flame. A harmless flame, so long as she did not let it consume her; and Gillie was a sensible girl. Controlled. She would make no mistakes.

CHAPTER III

SATURDAY MORNING

"WE LAID for him all night," said the Quartermaster Sergeant, his eyes curtained by the heaviness of memory, his hand moving automatically over the sparse hairs swept backwards over the melon-shaped dome of his head, "all night, and it was bitter cold, as it can be in the desert. We was frozen stiff, but we didn't dare bat an eyelid in case he'd take the opportunity to nip past."

The yellow light was soft in the stores, the brushing of trees on the window pane soft as Lejardin's voice as he moved up and down the shelves, singing a little song of his own.

"The roses round the door
Love Spam and Prem and Mor."

"And just as the dawn came up we spotted him, saw the shine of his head behind a ridge. We saw him, the bastard. He'd got Batty Jouvet, Corporal O'Grady and little Pelletrini. Of whom you've heard me tell. Now we'd got him.—You unpacked those football boots yet, Scott?"

The other storeman, engaged in stacking them against the wall of an inner room, called back that he had.

"—Now we'd got him. When we took him he yelled like a stuck pig, told us all about his Allah, and what He'd do to us. Then he got down in the sand and slobbered all over Chambeaudie's boots. Much good it did him. Wanted us to shoot him clean. Yes, we was going to be very clean. Clean like he'd been when him and his chinas caught Jouvet, and O'Grady and poor little Pelletrini."

"O Mary's little lamb
Loved Mor and Prem and Spam,"

Lejardin hummed, dropping a boot and catching it neatly just before it hit the ground.

The Quartermaster tasted his lips as if they were savoury. "So we lit a little fire, you know, like the boy scouts light, and we told him when you wanted to clean a thing you burned it, which is what you do to the needle when you're going to prick a blister. We tied him up nice, and laid him out comfy on his back. Then Chambeaudie lifted up his plates of meat and put 'em where they'd be nice and hot, because I told you it was a cold night."

Neither Lejardin nor Scott, who had heard the story before and would never believe it no matter how many times Alf Conway chose to repeat it, registered any emotion.

The Quartermaster sighed very deeply and began to stuff his pipe. "*All* right," he said, "*all* right. I know. Doubting Thomases. Don't believe I ever was in the Legion, do you? Don't believe I deserted? Well, you'll know the truth one day, you will. The scales will fall from your mince pies. But don't you go giving me away to the Major, or it's all U.P. with me. See? Even not counting that I'd cut your livers out."

They grinned sheepishly at him, thinking it one of his worse days. He knew when he was safe, he did. No one was going to shoot his mouth off over a tomfool story like that. Lejardin began to take the nails out of a case of tea, as he did so quietly singing,

"We love to shersh la fem,
And Spam and Mor and Prem."

Toddy Felse came in, bearing gossip in his face.

"All right," said Conway to the storemen, "you can pack up for half an hour. Scott, drop this memo in at the NAAFI, will you?"

When they had gone Felse sat down on a packing-case and flipped a cigarette to the Quartermaster, who flipped it back again, pointing to his pipe. "Smoking."

"Sorry. Well, any news?"

"You've got the news. What is it?"

"Bits and pieces. Sadness has ticked Toller off about Gillie Eagles. Letting down the mess, he says."

"When?"

"Last night, when they got back from the Fleece. Toller made a B.F. of himself while they were playing darts, got a bit lit and made a pass at her."

"How do you know?"

"Mulcaster overheard."

"Cripes," said Conway, with jocular scorn, "you didn't pump him? Falling a bit low, aren't you?"

"Not me. Don't have to. He blabs to Lilley and Lilley tells me."

"Lilley!" Conway pretended to spit.

Felse shrugged. "Granted. But he's a handy newsreel of what happens in the mess. Likes to please everyone, see? Play ball with Greasy and you hear things. The others are clams; even Glaiden, however shot he is."

Conway grinned. "Prick him and whisky spouts out."

"He's a good soldier, though. I'd trust Glaiden."

They mused for a while in silence. "But you haven't heard the best," Felse murmured, and the smile broadened across his face. "Went into the billets this morning looking for somebody, but he wasn't there. Found someone's kit in a horrible muck, Dakin's." Felse paused, obviously embarrassed.

"Had a snoop?" Conway suggested.

"Gave his bed a kick and something fell out of it, a diary."

"And it opened so you just couldn't help seeing."

"I'm human," Felse said. "Nearly knocked me flat, though. I copied a couple of pages and shoved the book back." He added dreamily, "Never met such a chap."

"Hand over." Conway took the sheet, read it and looked sad. Then he murmured, with wonder, "'Tuesday: sinned again. God help me, sustain me, I must be strong. Have courage to endure. Oh, God, when shall I be home again? Read in bed last night by torchlight, but books mean nothing. Wednesday: feel I can't go on. How can I drive this devil out? Didn't write to Madge, no heart for it. This nightmare will go on and on and on without hope.' Nothing else till Saturday last. 'Keep saying to myself, others have endured worse. Think of home all the time as if I'm half in it and half here but never in any one place. S.A.' What's that mean, Sex Appeal?"

"'Sinned Again,'" said Felse, "It keeps coming in.'"

"'This black night of life. Think I shall go mad. No one I can talk to here. Even V.T. is coarsened by the men, gets more like them. This war is hell and will never come to an end. I was not made for this. Wish I could see little X., she was my saviour. She was kind and for a while I forgot.'" Conway said abruptly, "Poor devil, and we're training him to fight the Germans. We're no good to him, he's no good to us." He added, "Don't chase him around more than you can help, Toddy. Just try to forget he's there. I remember a chap just like him when I was in the Legion ——"

Felse slapped him on the back. "When you get funny I get on with my job. So long, Alf."

Conway looked after him, a warm and gentle delight in his heart. Toddy was smart, but even he wasn't smart enough. If you just knew! He smelled the cold scent of the stars, saw the glow of the little fire casting its shadows on sand. But we only frightened him with the fire. Not that Scott and Jardy would believe it any more if I burned him up for them like Matheson Lang in the *Jew*.

He dragged down a box-file from the shelf above his head and went on with his work.

The Battery Captain put through a long-distance call.

"Sloane 01406?—That you, Helena? Claud speaking.—Yes, I heard from Charmian this morning. Poor little soul, a most heartrending letter.—No, no, of course he's not a skunk. He's only twenty, and no lad of twenty can guarantee his first love-affair as final." He listened to the excited voice angrily quacking through the receiver, cut into the flow. "Yes, I know Charm's different and I know he'll never meet anyone to hold a candle to her. You know it and I know it, but he's too young to have any sense—Do please stop raving, Helena, and don't make it worse for her by being too intense about it all. Listen, is she at home?—Well, then, tell her I want to speak to her. I want her to come down for the week-end.—Yes, to Christenhurst, of course; where else? I've got her a room and she can take the 12-30 from Waterloo.—I don't care if she is moping; it will take her out of herself. There's a dance on to-night that might amuse her.—Well, you just make her come if you have to drag her to the station. She catches the bus at Braybridge and I'll be at Strethamfold to meet her and bring her on. Now go along and push her into a taxi.

He walked slowly back to his quarters thinking, as he went, how sad it was that Charmian, on so fair a morning, should be in black misery about a happening that would, in a year's time, cause her no pain beyond, perhaps, a reminiscent pin-prick of humiliation. MacGregor had, of course, been clumsy, had prepared her not a whit for this cruel news. Pickering fancied that the boy himself was unhappy about it, was wondering, even in the excitement of a new love, whether he had not been a fool to forget Charmian. The memories of young manhood are almost as brief as childhood's memories; did he feel, uneasily, that to see again the delight of her face would spoil this new wartime content and create only a new unhappiness? But it's of no more use to expect fidelity from a boy of twenty than to expect a two-year old to dress himself; and youth must suffer its routine agonies.

The sun was brilliant on the patchwork fields and the big house glittered like a wedding-cake above the pinewoods. Eily Fogg came down the hill on her way back from the Geoghans', climbed over the stile and sat down for a moment on the crossbar to decorate her mouth before she came to the village and the soldiers. Then she stepped out into the

road and perched herself on the parapet above the stream. Pickering, pausing in the shadow of a shopblind, watched her. Out of the grocer's came Mrs. Fogg, tiny and gipsy-like, not too sober; she had a gift for being drunk at the most unlikely hours of the day. Her coat of astrakhan cloth, to which adhered strands of cotton, pieces of coloured fluff, flapped open above a flowered overall. Her hair ran wild beneath a poised green turban stuck through by an arrow-shaped pin. She saw Eily, tittuped unsteadily towards her and smacked her across her swinging legs. "What you got on your mouth? Didn't I tell you not to use that muck? You rub it off quick-sharp, or I'll tear your lips off."

The girl regarded her with interested contempt. Jumping down, she swaggered off along the road a yard or so ahead of her mother, and the two went in single file towards the row of cottages beyond the church.

Over the bridge marched C troop, boots ringing on the bright cement. Phyllis Ricks, who was a booking-office clerk at Strethamfold Station, passed them on her way home from work, dismounted from her bicycle and waited for them to draw abreast. She was a handsome, hawkfaced girl with bold blue eyes widely set beneath heavy blond brows. She stared at Ron Menhenheott, lifted her hand slightly in a gesture intended for him alone. He glanced at her swiftly, then shifted his gaze so that he seemed to be observing a landscape just beyond her ear. "Troop: halt!"

The boots grated and clacked. The street was silent save for the rattling of the leaves, the noise of massed breathing. The smoke from a dozen mouths hung silvery upon the cold air.

"Troop: fall—out!"

Phyllis Ricks smiled at the back of Menhenheott's head, where the hairs glistened like fire.

The street awoke. The men swarmed over the pavement, talking, laughing and whistling.

Menhenheott said, "Hullo, Phyl," gravely touched the bridge of his nose to her and went off towards the Sergeants' Mess. Her expression did not change. She got on her bicycle and rode away.

Pickering walked on. As he was turning into the officers' quarters, he saw a familiar back-view disappearing into the

whitewashed cottage next to the Lamb, and he laughed to himself. Felse's wife. She'd make a better B.S.M. than he, poor devil. What on earth did he ask her down here for? She was bad enough last time we had a dance, blackguarding him in a whisper that could be heard up at the M.T. park. Bad luck for him to be quartered so near his sister-in-law; even the defence regulations can't keep Mrs. F. away from the place. May Budgen came out of the linen draper's, carrying, unwrapped, a pair of stockings and a blue woollen scarf. She'd better watch her step with Toddy. A fine fat girl, that, pink as a fondant cream. Renoir would have liked her. If Felse had met her before he met Mrs. F., what a happy man he might have been.

He went indoors. The house was, with the exception of the Geogehans', the only three-storied building in Christenhurst. On the ground floor was Cameron-Leckie's room, with bath and dressing-room attached, and Toller slept in the cubby-hole at the end of the passage. Pickering was lodged on the second floor next to Cassilis and Strutt, who shared a room, and Glaiden had a small room to himself built out over a garage at the back. On the top floor were Elvorden and Lilley, sleeping at respective ends of a long wash-room. It was a bare and rather draughty house used, from the war's beginning until a recent date, as headquarters for a research unit attached to the Ministry of Food. During the Battle of Britain, when the surrounding hills had been littered with wrecked aircraft, a German plane had jettisoned a stick of low-calibre bombs upon the village, one of which, falling in the yard, had blown out most of the back windows; and several of these were still darkened with wood and plaster-boarding. As Pickering went along the passage to his own room he heard voices from the floor above, the sound amplified by the tiled walls of the lavatory.

"... the British Army sits on its bottom because it's no bloody good on its feet."

"Oh, shut up, Lilley." This was Strutt. "Our lads are as good as any others when they get the chance, and God knows they're willing enough to take one."

Lilley murmured something inaudible.

Cassilis said, "Soap, Strutty."

"Catch."

"Thanks.—Well, you just wait and see."

"I've seen," said Lilley. "Haven't we all?" His voice rose. "Look at the campaigns in Greece and Crete. Have to get the Bolshies to do the fighting when we want any done, and where will that land us? Wait till after the war. We'll all find ourselves blasted comrades.—Yes, you too, Elvorden. You'll be cleaning the state latrines. Then you'll wonder if we really were on the right side all along."

"Hitler tickles you to death, doesn't he?" Cassilis' voice was soft but carrying.

"He can make our High Command look like cat's-meat."

"One day," said Strutt, "they'll put you in Brixton and no one will feel like asking questions about you in the House."

"And if we lose the war," Lilley retorted, "as we're bidding fair to do ——" The rest of his words were lost in a drone of water, as the tank refilled. In a minute or so Strutt came running downstairs. He looked red and angry.

The Battery Captain, who was beginning to feel like an eavesdropping butler in a detective story, went into his own room and shut the door. Even so, stray words came to him, floating down from the wash-room windows to his own.

"—— rotten talk." Cassilis.

"—— talk about democracy, but Lilley gets sat on if he even dares to ——" Elvorden.

The squeak of a door, and Mulcaster's voice intruding. "Come to change the towels, sir."

Pickering wrote a letter, made out a cheque to an outfitter and went downstairs. In the hall he met Lilley, alone, and he stopped him.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, look, when I'm in my room I can hear every word spoken in the wash-place." Not strictly true, for audibility was better in the passage: but this, Pickering thought, is no time for minnie-ann niceties of conduct. "Those walls make a sounding-board, and anyone on the first floor hears what goes on up there whether he likes it or not."

"Sorry, sir," said Lilley, indicating by a subtlety of tone, a flicker of his eyebrows, that he did not consider himself responsible for things a snooper might happen to overhear.

"I don't like that line of talk of yours, Lilley; it's harmful to discipline and insulting to the army. We're fighting a war against Nazi Germany. If you objected to

that, then you should have registered as a C.O. If you're merely talking for the sake of talk, you'd better be more careful. If I hear this sort of thing again I shall have to report it to the B.C."

Lilley was silent.

"Do you want to say anything?" Pickering asked sharply.

"Only that this is supposed to be a war for democracy. As Elvorden said. I expect you heard him." The sneer was unmistakeable. "That means free speech, everyone having a right to an opinion. Or that's what I've always understood." He shaded his last few words with a degree of deferent frankness very hard to challenge.

"In war time, every man has a right to speak his own mind provided he isn't impeding or harming the war effort."

"Yes."

"I don't want to bring this up again."

"No, sir."

Pickering was baffled, feeling a weakness in his handling of Lilley, yet unable to imagine a better, or more fair-minded approach. "All right. That's all for the present."

Feeling in need of clean company he spoke to Strutt and Cassilis, whom he met in the street, and took them both into the Fleece for a drink.

"The cornet," said Menhenheott lovingly, "is a wonderful instrument."

The men were sunning themselves before dinner on the fence that bordered the football-field.

"You can make it talk to you. Temperamental it is, too; treat it rough and it yowls like a cat with the belly-ache, but treat it right and it'll coo. It will, honest." He ran his finger about the cup-shaped mouthpiece, breathed on the metal and polished it with a corner of his handkerchief.

"Playing to-night, Sarge?" Lejardin enquired.

Menhenheott nodded. "Wasn't going to, but the dance committee said we wanted another turn, even if Fred did recite twice."

"What are you doing, Fred?" Mangan asked Toffit, "Christmas Day in the Workhouse?"

The joke was ignored. "Something serious and something light."

"Grim and gay," Tawney approved. "What's the grim one going to be?"

"Not sure yet. I'm doing *Albert and the Lion* for the light one. Might do *If*."

"Oh, not *If*. Everyone does that. Now my dad used to recite a good poem to me," Tawney mused, "called *Billy's Rose*.

'Billy's dead, and gone to glory—so is Billy's sister Nell:
There's a tale I know about them were I poet I would tell;
Soft it comes, with perfume laden, like a breath of country air
Wafted down the filthy alley, bringing fragrant odours there.'"

He spoke these lines with expression.

"That's slop," said Toffit, disgusted, "I don't go for slop."

"My dad had much that idea about it, certainly."

"Well, then, you silly basket, what are you kidding me for?"

"It'll give the audience a better laugh than *If*."

"They're not meant to laugh at *If*," said Toffit sourly.

Menhenheott blew a little golden note on his cornet. "I'm going to play *Jingle Jangle*."

"You can't play that on a cornet, Sarge," Dakin protested, "it's not a jingling instrument."

"Well, what would *you* play it on?"

"I wouldn't play it at all."

"Better listen to him," said Tawney, "he knows about music. He goes to Queen's Hall and faints on hot nights."

Menhenheott looked thoughtfully at the ground. "All right. It'll have to be *Eileen Alannah*."

"Who's taking my name in vain?" said Eily Fogg, materialising like a peaky and undersized ghost in the middle of the group.

"Oh, help," Mangan cried, "here's Garbo. I'm off to feed."

"That's right, sour puss," said Eily, "be a crab." She smiled upon the others. "I got a new dress for to-night."

"What you want is crawlers," Mangan said.

She persisted, "A nice one. It's blue."

Tawney told her kindly that he was sure she'd look very pretty. She jabbed her fist into his stomach, making him grunt. "Bad girl! What harm have I done you?"

"It's what I've done you, I should think. Giving me the cold shoulder. When are we going to the pictures again?"

Menhenheott, who had been playing over and over again a small, unrecognisable phrase, took the cornet from his lips and looked at her. "'Again'?" he repeated.

Dakin swallowed, and went red. "Secret in your life, Vic? First I've heard."

"Now, now, now," Mangan bumbled, "the villain unmasked. We're hearing something."

Delightedly conscious of the effect she had produced, Eily smiled in triumph about her. "He did take me out, didn't you, Vic?"

He shook his head at her, his dark face serious. "You shouldn't tell tales out of school. Your tongue shall be slit and all the little puppy-dogs shall have a little bit."

"It's true."

"Perfectly," he agreed.

She postured, hands on her hips, head uptilted. "Going to dance with me to-night.?"

"If I can stall Mangan off," he assured her, unsmiling.

Satisfied, she waved a good-bye and strolled back down the street, swaying unsteadily on her high heels.

Menhenheott blew a long, sustained note. "Well, just goes to show you never know."

"Our Vic," said Mangan sadly, "our quiet little damn-your-eyes Vicky."

Toffit remarked that any chap who took Eily out wanted his brains brushed, "Not that it's none of my business."

Dakin said nothing.

"Once upon a time," Tawney began, "when the regiment was stationed at Strethamfold, there was a night of bleak and stormy weather with the wind blowing ninety miles an hour.—Give me the horn, Sarge, I want to make wind noises."

"You don't *have* to explain," Mangan told him elaborately, "not even to the doctor when he comes to examine your head. You don't have to say a word."

Tawney called for silence. "The wind was blowing ninety m.p.h.—remember where we stopped? Well, I was waiting

in a queue for the pictures and Eily was just in front of me. When we got to the box-office the shillings were full and she'd got no more money, so she asked me to lend her sixpence. What did I do? What *does* a gentleman do?"

"I wouldn't know," said Menhenheott.

"I bought her ticket for her. Didn't realise till afterwards that it meant having her in the next seat. When we came out she still stuck like the plague and I wanted to get rid of her so I could have some supper at Cooper's. She said she was hungry, so I suggested she nipped home and remedied the fault. Then she told me her Auntie never had anything to eat after tea, except a cup of cocoa at bed-time. The wind was blowing hard, as I told you. A sleet was falling, the streets were empty, roughly speaking, and there wasn't a living soul in Cooper's, so I took her in and gave her fish and chips. And she ate like an anaconda. Poor little Titch, it made me dizzy to watch her."

"Cleared," said Mangan at once, "with not a stain on his bloody honour. Give him back his stripes. Give him a sword and a cocked hat."

"If she was starved with Auntie," Menhenheott remarked, "she'll be a sight worse off with that drunken old bag of a mother. They say in the Lamb that Ma Fogg never cooks a meal at all; she buys cheese and she buys cucumber, and the rest is booze. Buys it with what she saves on the rations. Well!" He jumped off the fence. "I'm going to doll up the hall. See you later."

"Aren't you coming to feed?" Toffit asked.

"No. Going to Strethamfold this afternoon, and I'll have something there."

"Want any help?"

"No, thanks. Scott and Mangan are coming in to chalk the floor later on and Malleson's going to fix up the paper-chains and stuff. You can do what you like with the platform, Tawney. We've got some green crepe paper left over from last time, but I don't know what else there is."

"Cassilis said he'd do that, if you liked. He was a stage-designer in civvy street, so he'd probably make it look good."

"Cor, was he? Let him go ahead. Nice of him."

"He's all right," said Lejardin, "I like Cassilis."

"But I wouldn't much like to have him around in action,"

Menhenheott observed, after a little consideration; "he'd try too hard."

He went down to the village hall. Next door to it was the Ricks' cottage, the garden of which abutted on to the cindered yard. Phyllis was sitting on the brick wall, and when Menhenheott came out to grub in the shed for tinsel and bunting she called to him.

"Here, Ron. Come over here."

He swore under his breath, threw the bundle of flags into a corner and came to stand in her shadow, looking up at her serene, broad face. "You again. I might have known."

"Yes, you might, mightn't you? What was the idea of freezing me out this morning?"

"Damn it, I can't stop and leer at you in the middle of a parade."

"You didn't stop and leer when it broke up, did you? Just froze me out." She braced herself. "Stand clear, I'm coming over."

He said in alarm, "You get back. You know you're not allowed here."

"Why not?"

"Private property." He caught her descending feet and heaved them upwards, planting them on top of the wall. "Look, I can't stay here yarning with you all day."

"Liked me all right last week, didn't you?"

"That was last week."

"Well, and what have I done wrong since then?"

"I didn't say you'd done anything."

"I know. Maudie's been at you again."

"Shut up," said Menhenheott, still staring at her.

"I won't. She whines at you; I saw her at it when you brought her down here. Got wild with you if you didn't dance with her even in the Paul Jones."

He said slowly, "You stop that. I'm engaged to Maudie, aren't I? I was a fool to play around with you, and I suppose I owe you something; but I'm not going to do the dirty on her."

"Pretty late to be all noble now, isn't it?"

"Pretty," said Menhenheott, "but not too late. I'm sorry, Phyl. I'm a scab."

She smiled at him calmly. "Oh, don't bother to apologize.

I don't feel crushed, if you think I do. I can find plenty other chaps if I want, but I'm sticking around because I think Maudie's bad for you, and I'm good for you."

He was exasperated. "Now listen, I don't care if you jump under a bus. Got that?"

Snapping a bright sprig from the tree that hung above her, she began to strip off the red and golden leaves. "He loves me, he loves me not. He do, he don't. He'll marry me, he won't. He would—if he could—but he can't. He loves me ——"

"I said," he repeated slowly, "you can jump under a bus."

Drawing the stem into an arc she let it spring back again so that the tip slashed his forehead. Menhenheott glanced quickly around, then hauled her down and kissed her. He listened to the thundering of her heart and of his own. Fumbling for her imprisoned hand, he snatched the sprig and stuck it like an Indian's feather in her hair. The clean, cold scent of her face was strong in his nostrils. The heat of love ran so violently down into his throat that he began to tremble, pressing her even more hardly against him. Her arms, released, moved upwards and she cupped his head in her fingers.

After a moment or so he let her go. She stepped back, a little flushed but still serene; displaying contentment without triumph. "There, you see," said Phyllis Ricks.

"And you don't see. You don't see an inch beyond your nose."

"Now what? Some new idea?"

"Why do you think I kissed you?"

"Because you wanted to. That's why I kissed you, I mean, because *I* did."

"Because I wanted to show you something I do to plenty of girls like you. It was to say Or Revoir, too. No use, Phyl, I'm through. Sorry you have been tr-r-roubled, as the 'phone girls say."

She was shaken. Her face darkened, her eyes were uncertain. "Funny, but you make me mad even though I know you're lying."

"Conceit of yourself, haven't you?" asked Menhenheott.

May Budgen called from the garden. "Phyl! Where've you got to?"

"Oh, damn," said Phyllis Ricks, "I'd forgotten her." She climbed neatly on to the shed roof and stepped from it to the wall. "Here I am."

"What are you doing up there? May asked. "Aren't you ready yet? The bus will be along in a tick."

"All right, I'm coming. See you to-night, Ron."

He did not reply. He heard May say, in a tone of dark understanding, "Oh, it's him, is it?" Then she began to explain, between giggles, how she had taken a bet to capture Felse every time in the Paul Jones. "Coralie says I'll never do it, but I will. You only have to spread out your arms and walk either quick or slow. It's easy."

The voices of the two girls, chiming airily as bells in a steeple, drifted away. The trees shivered in the wind, showering ore upon the blackened ground. Menhenheott was visited by a sense of unease, a sense of having made some mistake to which there would be consequences unpleasant to himself. Then, remembering the strong beauty of Phyllis in his arms, the kiss that, out of desire and rage, he had given her, he grinned and started to whistle. He whistled until he thought of Maud Fletcher, when depression came upon him. He tried, as he fastened the flags crosswise against the wall, arranging them carefully over the minatory portraits of dead churchwardens, to recall the phrases of the letter he had that morning received from her. At last he sat down on the edge of the platform, lit a cigarette, took the envelope from his pocket and re-read the two closely-written sheets.

". . . I know you won't play around with any other girl because your not that kind. I know your not Ron. Your straight and fine. I'm sorry I made a scene when I was down but it is just because I love you so Ron. I trust you and you could not deceive anyone who trusted you could you? That Phyllis girl who was after you made me a bit upset but I know she's fast and common not your type and anyway you said you'd never fall in love with anyone who chased you remember? It was silly of me and I want you to forgive me dear Ron Mum says I am silly to doubt you because you are a straight fellow not like some of them. Now you will be angry because I told Mum but I was so upset I could not help crying. Then she got into one of her states you know how she is and of course I had to tell everything. I

love you Ron and I am thinking of you every day and not being jealous or soft because I know you will always be true."

For a moment some flash-lit part of his mind knew this for the blackmail it was ; and then the light went out, and he was once more in the darkness of despair, of pity, and of determination that because she trusted in him he must never let her down.

Victor Tawney, when dinner was over, went to Grayling Wood where he knew he would waylay Gillian Eagles who, every Saturday morning, went to Strethamfold to see the baby and on fine days left the bus at Lambridge Cross and walked home to Christenhurst over the hills.

He heard the noise of her progress along the narrow path through the exuberant and fleshy undergrowth, heard the crackling of twigs beneath her feet, the recoil of the boughs as they closed behind her into their defensive intricacies. Then he saw her step into the clearing, the sun creating an incandescence about her wiry hair, imparting a spectral brilliance to her glassy flesh. When she saw Tawney she stopped, made a little noise of exasperation and threw the cigarette she had been smoking into a screen of bracken.

" Fie on you," he said, " do you want to start a forest fire ? " He searched for it and stubbed it out.

" Don't be an imbecile. The ground's wringing wet."

" Better be safe than sorry. Give me a kiss, Gillie, a long one."

" Now you listen to me ! " She grew pale with anger. " You stop following me around. Do you want a scandal ? "

" Oh dear, oh dear," he murmured, " I thought poor old Toller was the scandal king. The poor old Bull."

" It wasn't my fault."

" No fault of Helen's, neither, that Paris played fast and loose with her. She just sat and looked swell. As you do. But really, the Bull shouldn't try to kiss your elbow in public."

" If you've got anything to say," said Gillie, " say it and go away."

He replied seriously, " I have. Sit down with me a minute, won't you ? It couldn't hurt. There's no one around for miles." He pulled her gently towards a fallen tree, spread

his handkerchief over the bark. She seated herself with the detachment of a Queen fallen into the hands of brigands. Tawney sat down beside her, yet so removed that no part of his body touched hers. "I love you, Gillie. When we first came here you seemed to like me. Anyway, you gave me no cause to think you didn't."

"If you're talking about that bracelet," she said, "you can have the damned thing back. I never asked you to give me presents, and anyway, I had to explain it away to Sam."

"I'm not talking about it."

"Get to the point, then. I can't hang around here all day."

"If I must be crude, you once liked me to kiss you. Do you remember how we sneaked out during that first dance?"

"More fool me. I thought you looked lost and in need of a mamma."

"O excellent mamma," said Tawney thoughtfully, "a mamma come to judgment. Don't do that, Gillie!" She had broken up a match into small pieces, which she was aiming one by one at an anthill.

"Why not?"

"So untidy. And distracting. Don't you like me at all?"

"I like you all right."

"If you were free, would you marry me?"

She gave him a long and curious glance. The sun, touching her eyes, discovered in them flecks of gold and green, as it discovers luminous mosses in the shallows of a muddy river. "But I'm not."

"Supposing you were? You told me yourself that Sam didn't seem to care a rap about you. Certainly I've never seen a man less fussy about his wife."

She retorted violently, "No, I would not!"

"I am not altogether indigent," said Tawney. "In civvy street I had a nice little job, which will receive me back again after the war, and I have a nice little income, unearned, from my father."

Gillie stretched herself, swung her body around and faced him, her arms still uplifted in the air, as if she would fly away. She said deliberately, "If I ever get the chance to marry again I shall marry a live man. You're a dead one."

"Oh. Am I? I hadn't looked at myself in that light." He seemed now to be doing so.

"Why haven't you a commission? You should have. You're public school, aren't you?"

"My school was horribly public," he replied. "Any rat could go there."

"Stop being clever."

"It's very hard for anyone so gifted as I am to stop it at a moment's notice."

Gillie said, breathing quickly, "Do you know what I think of you? You're a failure."

"At what? At becoming an ossifer? I don't want to become one."

"Of course you must want to. Why pretend? The men aren't your sort."

"I am the only sort of my kind," he told her soberly, "which is a blessing. So you'd only marry me if I were called Sir by Ron and Mangan? If I had a nice silky suit for evenings?"

"I wouldn't marry you at all. For God's sake stop pestering me."

"Would you marry Toller?"

"Oh, be quiet."

"Mister Elvorden, perhaps? He's lovely, don't you think? Or Lilley? He'd call you The Wifie. Or Strutt? No, you hate Strutt's guts. Gut's strutts. He doesn't make a play for you, does he? Maybe you want Blanco Pickering. Now he'd be attractive to some women. Gentle and nice. The cynical touch, too, that so many find fascinating. What about Glaiden? He's a managing director of something, and they're always distinguished."

She had risen and was walking quickly down the hill, Tawney in pursuit. When they reached the stile she turned to him. "This is the last I want to see of you. Go and drink in the Lamb: it's your kind of place. You've made me so sick that I'm afraid I'll hit you if you ever pester me again. Here's your rotten bracelet. Give it to Eily Fogg; she'll be grateful for it."

"All right," he said, "I shan't pester you again." Taking the gold chain hung with miniature flags, playing cards and animals, he threw it into the bushes. "Finders keepers. I love you, Gillie, but one of these days I'm going to thank God that I can't have you."

Something in his voice seemed to disturb her, for she said,

"No hard feelings, Vic. Probably I've said too much, but we all do, sometimes. It's just that I can't care for you in that way, that's all. You're a nice boy and the best-looking I've seen yet. Be sensible, and be friends."

"Oh, no," he replied, and he sounded shocked. "Never friends. Love or nothing, Gillie."

"If you want it that way, then nothing."

He said to her, "You do realise, don't you, that the moment you're gone I shall rake out that bracelet and take it back to the shop? After all, a gunner has to watch his pocket. One pound nine and six is one pound nine and six."

All at once, as if she could endure no more of him, she began to run, moving lightly, sure-footedly over the rough ground. He watched her till the last flicker of her green skirt had become a blowing bough, till the air troubled by her passing had settled once more into its myriad clots of gold. Then he lay down on the leafy ground, his head in his arms, and for a while remained quite still in a death of loneliness.

CHAPTER IV

AFTERNOON

STRUTT CAME through the hotel entrance of the Fleece.

"Your wife's here," said Gillie Eagles, by her unsmiling nod conveying that the guest had not impressed her, "she's having lunch."

The dining-room was cold and gloomy, for Gillie, who applied her gifts for home-making only to places where the result was constantly appreciated, had not extended them to it. The walls, covered to a height of five feet by brown Lincrusta Walton and painted, for the rest, a serviceable stone-grey, would not have reflected light even had it penetrated to them, which it did not, for the densely-curtained bays were further obscured by a forest of ferns as varying in degrees of health as sufferers in an out-patients department. The great overmantel mirror reflected in its ghostly depths the file of rectangular tables on each of which was centred a vase filled with immortelles, Alexandra roses and poppies preserved from last year's Armistice Day.

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Over the door, presenting much the same effect as a pail of water poised there for a booby-trap, was the head of a great and shabby stag, and above the window a blackened, anonymous fish was levitating in a glass case. Just below the cornice pole, at a height which happily precluded close study, a row of subject pictures hung in wrongful order; in the first, the collie was hauling her pups on to the kennel roof to save them from the rising floods, in the second she lay dead upon the draining sands, and in the third she was simply in process of drowning. On the overmantel shelves were photographs of Sam's unloved and half-forgotten relations.

Stacey was sitting at a table halfway down the room, picking distastefully at a vivid pudding that had been mercifully scumbled by a glaze of thin custard. As Strutt came into the room she said, "*On mange mal ici.*" She rose briskly and kissed him, afterwards rubbing her hand over his mouth to remove a smear of lip-rouge. She was a tall young woman of healthy slenderness, her face round and charming under a fringe of round dark curls.

"I haven't seen you for two months," he reminded her.

She kissed him again, sat down and continued to poke at her plate. Taking the fork from her, he put a few grains of pudding into his mouth. "No, it's not so good, is it? About the same as we get in the army."

"You do bring me to some shocking places." Suddenly she beamed. "You remember when we used to go walking in France, how you always said to hotel proprietors, *On mange bien ici?* I've often thought how ridiculous it was. What did you expect them to say, 'No, Sir, something horrible'?"

"It showed them that I was alert," said Strutt. "Well, how are you, darling?"

"Underfed and overworked. Just a little tired. It's lovely to see you." She pushed back her plate, lit two cigarettes and handed one to him. "You look well."

"I am."

"Everything all right!"

"Fine. How's London looking?"

"Hellish dark and smells of cheese."

"Very witty," he commented. "You thought that out on the way down in the train."

"I perfected it at Bromley. I say, it's freezing in here; don't you think so?"

"No fires lit in public rooms till dusk. Do they give you any coffee?"

"How should I know? I only got here half an hour ago."

"We'll ring." Strutt walked round the room in search of the bell, found it behind a Shakespeare calendar. "I don't think it works." They listened. "No, it doesn't. "I'll go out and speak to Gillie."

"Gillie? Is that the skinned rabbit with the hair?"

He paused, his hand upon the door. "Does she really strike you that way? Honestly? I'm interested to know what another woman thinks, because she's a terrific success with the men."

Stacey considered the subject conscientiously. "Perhaps I'm a little biased, because she seemed so unfriendly. I suppose she's attractive in a way, though; yes, definitely she would be."

"Wasn't she nice to you?"

"Not precisely un-nice. We'll say she doesn't seem very excited about visitors. I suppose these places do so well in wartime that proprietors don't have to be excited."

Strutt said idly, "Perhaps she's jealous of you."

"Of me? Why?"

The idea, having seeded itself, put forth a cotyledon. One for Ferris, he thought; I'll scare you, Stacey. "Gillie is in love with half the Battery. She likes me, too."

A little shaken, she went to the mirror and began to tidy her hair. "Of course she does, darling," she said heartily. "Anyone would. I do. It shows taste."

"New hair-style."

"Like it?"

"Like a picture the B.K. has in his room. Some French girl, Zélie de Something. Wait a moment, and I'll try and get some coffee."

Gillie opened the door so suddenly that she nearly knocked him down. "Did you ring?"

"Oh, sorry; I thought the bell wasn't working."

"I came as soon as I could. Do you want anything?"

"Could we have some coffee?"

Gillie hesitated. "We don't serve it."

"Tea, then."

"I'll see. I'll ask them in the kitchen."

"I'm so cold," said Stacey, turning from the glass, "that I should be most grateful for anything warming. If you could, please."

"For one?"

"You want any, Philip?"

"I'll have some of yours."

"One only, please, Mrs. Eagles."

When Gillie had gone Stacey said, "You know, I wouldn't guess at a glance that she liked you. She seems plain rude, to me. Unless, of course, it's all pure dissembling."

"Pure dissembling," said Strutt. He asked her about Ferris.

"He's working hard and chattering hard. He wastes so much time talking that I wonder how anything gets done at all; but it does. Our department was streets ahead of the others last week."

"What's the job?"

"Secret. I can't tell you."

"Pooh," said Strutt.

She whispered, "Reorganisation of the engineering shops at East Y and North Z. Mean anything to you?"

"Nothing."

"It doesn't mean much to me, either. Want me to tell you where East Y and North Z are?"

"Not particularly. I shouldn't care"

"I thought not. Anyway, I shan't. Not," she added wistfully, "unless you'd die if you didn't know." She put her arm around him, drawing herself closely against his side. "Teddy said I was to give his regards to the Field Marshal."

"That's gibberish to me. Who's Teddy?"

"Ferris. I call him that now. You're the Field Marshal. He promotes you on the Monday of every week. God knows where you're going from now on."

Strutt thought in a panic, We've been married five years and there's never been a shadow of this before. I should have thought I was mad to be jealous of Stacey, of Stacey who is all my life, who speaks aloud the very words I am thinking, gratifies a wish before I have expressed it. Is she laughing at me with him? His heart moved in love and fright. Very comical.

"Oh, don't be silly! He's interested in you. He wants to meet you on your next leave."

"I shall tear the days off my calendar. Is there a Mrs. Ferris?"

"She's in America with their two children."

"Oh. There's a Mr. Eagles, but he likewise doesn't count."

"You are stupid," she murmured, faintly smiling.

Gillie came in with a tray, banged it down on the sideboard and went out again.

"Thank you so much," Stacey called after her. "Philip, let's take this upstairs to my bedroom. It's quite warm there because the bath's next door and the airing-cupboard's on my side of the wall." They went up the two angular flights and along a creaking corridor to a room built a little below the storey-level. "I shall fall over these steps and break my neck before I go home," she said, adding pointlessly, "and I had to stand all the way coming down."

"Well, if you do break your neck you'll make the return journey horizontally, in a box." Closing the door, he took her in his arms and speculatively kissed her eyes, cheeks and lips. "Darling."

She pressed him lightly away from her. "I'm not going to have this tea going cold. You sit down on the bed and I'll pour out. I've lots I want to ask you. How much are we going to see of each other?"

Slowly he obeyed her. "This week-end?"

"Of course. Still taking sugar?"

"No, I've gone off it in tea. Well, I can't sleep here either night, but I don't have to get in till late. To-morrow morning I've got to take church parade—you can come and sit with me, if you like—and I'll be free from then on. There's a dance to-night. All ranks. We'll go along and watch, shall we?"

"We will." Sitting down on the edge of the dressing-table, she looked at him over her cup.

"And I say, do you mind if we go out and watch a football-match this afternoon? Only for half an hour. There's nothing else to do, anyway." Moving away from me as if I had small-pox, Stacey? After all these years?

"But it's freezing."

"You'll warm up when you get outside."

"In a filthy, muddy field."

"Oh, come on. It won't hurt you."

She put her suitcase on a chair and undid the catches. "I've got something to show you. A real, new dress. I'll wear it to the dance." She spread out over the bed a pinafore frock of slate-blue, under which was a full-sleeved white blouse heavily embroidered in blue and violet. "Pleasing?"

The irritation he had so violently repressed spouted suddenly upwards. "You can't wear that. You'll look like a balalaika orchestra."

Stacey, taken aback, flushed to her eyebrows. "What's wrong with it? It's nice."

"It's all right as a dress, but you can't wear it to-night."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's not our dance. We go to look on, really"—he smiled uneasily—"to lend colour to the proceedings. If you wore that it would look as if you were expecting to be the Queen of the May."

"Or as if I expected to dance."

"Oh, of course you can dance! But ——"

"But I have to look like the visiting duchess bowing from side to side? How filthily snobbish." She was humiliated.

He shrugged. "Well, that's how things are. You look nice in that suit you've got on."

Stacey went to the window where she stared down upon the yards and gardens of Christenhurst, at the multicoloured trees seething under a sky that was rapidly losing its morning brightness, at the strip of High Street visible between the village hall and the northern wall of the Fleece. "I think you're being rather horrible to-day, Philip. What's the matter? Is something worrying you?"

He said nothing.

She added childishly, in a spurt of temper, "I had a foul journey down, and the food in this place is beastly, and I'm frozen to death and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if I caught cold. And to add to it all, you're disgusting to me."

He was touched to delight in her, for a moment convinced that his fears had been no more than moonshine; yet a lingering demon prompted him to try her further. "Come here, and don't be silly. Come on. I want to kiss you. By

the way, I'll have to dance with Gillie Eagles once to-night, in return for services rendered. You won't mind?"

She did not move. "What services?"

"Oh, letting me have a meal here once or twice when I got back too late from Strethamfold to eat at the mess." This was pure fiction.

"You can dance with whoever you like."

"Gillie is useful."

"Of course."

"She likes me and she's not a bad sort, of her sort."

"She really is quite attractive," Stacey agreed. She said with unnatural brightness, "He's the Battery Captain, isn't he, that very fair man? I remember seeing him at Strethamfold. Thin, and not much taller than I am. He's talking to an exceedingly pretty girl."

Strutt came to stand at the window, peering over her shoulder at the street. "Yes, that's Blanco."

"Why Blanco? Because he's white-looking?"

"No. Pickering's Blanco. It's a brand. His name's Pickering."

"She is pretty. But very young."

"She's his sister, or half-sister, rather. She came to Strethamfold for the day once, before the cars were taken off the roads. Hurry up, get your things on."

"I can't watch football in these shoes." She raised her foot.

"Shouldn't wear such fool things when you come down to the country. Never mind, I'll clean them up for you if they get mucky."

Stacey put on her top-coat, wrapped a scarf about her head. At the door she turned sharply as if she meant to kiss him, but he pretended not to notice. They went out into the icy wind that had sprung up with the dulling of the sun. "You won't find the field muddy," Strutt said, "because we haven't had any rain for a week."

Cassilis came by, carrying a roll of coloured paper.

"Here, Eric! Come here. I want you to meet my wife. Stacey, this is Cassilis."

"I've heard Philip talk about you," she said, "but you were on leave when I came down to Strethamfold."

"What are you doing with all that stuff?" Strutt asked him.

"Going to do the platform for the dance. I told Tawney I would. It used to be my job," he explained to Stacey, "making stages look nice. This will be a little, but not very much, like old times. You going to the match? Better you than me."

"Well, Sadness likes us to look keen," said Strutt, "so my wife has to suffer."

Cassilis excused himself and went into the hall.

On their way up to the field they met Tawney, who saluted and stopped. "Can I speak to you a minute, sir?"

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"I heard the Major asking for you a little while back, sir. I think he wants to see you."

"Oh. All right. Thank you. You coming to-night, Tawney? I thought you were going on leave this week-end."

"I was, but my people changed their plans. They're going to Brittonmouth for a fortnight."

"Can't stand Brittonmouth. It gives me a steady headache and fluff on my tongue; doesn't it you?"

"It is enervating," Tawney agreed, "but I like it. My uncle lives there, so I sometimes used to spend a month or so in the winter with him."

"Well, see you at the dance."

"I hope so, sir," Tawney smiled, saluted and walked on.

"Very nice," said Stacey appreciatively, "and very handsome. Is he the one who failed the O.C.T.U.S.?"

"That's the one."

"Can't you give even him a stripe? He seems very smart."

"He doesn't want one. Every time we make the offer he just refuses it."

Turning down a narrow lane they came to the cattle-gate that gave on to the field. "No mud!" Stacey exclaimed, looking down at the trodden slush.

"Well, it's only just here, where people are always passing through."

She hopped across the morass and picked her way along the hedge, staggering now and then as she stubbed her foot on a ridge of frosted mud. The game was in progress. "B. troop against R.H.Q.," Strutt told her, "they'll beat us; they've got a wider choice of team." Yellow shirts and

green swept in a blur of colour up the field, and the group of officers on the sidelines shouted advice. The goalkeeper of B crouched simian between the posts, head darting from side to side. The ball spun out of the mass, was cracked from an iron head, met a bunch of boots and went wide. A thin, light boy from R.H.Q. sprang up like a Jack-in-the-box from nowhere and the ball, speeding from his foot, looped serenely and without urgency towards the goal.

"Well played!" Elvorden shouted, his voice cracking on the upward sweep.

The goalkeeper swung himself sideways, skidded, and by a miracle stopped the ball.

The Battery Commander strode up and down, whacking his cane in applause upon the palm of his hand. Upon his melancholy face there was a gleam of pleasure pale and transient as winter sun.

"I'm so cold," Stacey murmured piteously, "and my feet have gone dead."

They stood in silence for another ten minutes.

"Come and sit on the fence. It's more sheltered."

She followed Strutt along the field to the lee of a blackberry hedge, and as she climbed on to the wooden crossbar tore her stocking on a bramble. She swore savagely.

"Stacey!" said Strutt, amused and scandalised.

"I wish I'd never come. This is a foul place. I've only got one more silk pair, and I only bought these yesterday. I want my tea. I wish I were home again."

"Oh, darling, I'll buy you some more stockings! I'm so sorry you're miserable. We'll go soon."

"You can't buy me any, because I can't spare the coupons. Have we got to watch this any longer?"

The game was rolling like tumbleweed back and forth over the faded grass. The brightness had fallen from the sky to be displaced by a reddish glow, promising rainfall to come. Toller and Glaiden were stamping their frozen feet, beating their hands together. Lilley was shouting advice to the forwards, pitting his voice against the flapping winds. Strutt, seeing his wife was not far from tears, lifted her down from the fence and assured her that it could not possibly be more than half an hour to tea-time. They left the field, acknowledging, as they went, Lilley's sour salutation.

Happily, they returned to find the fire lit in the dining-room and the walls alive with the reflected flame. Lucy, one of the two girls who between them did the work of the house, came in answer to the bell and asked if they would like toast.

While they waited for the tray, Strutt came to sit opposite to Stacey on the club fender. "Things have gone wrong with us to-day, haven't they? Poor darling, I'm so sorry. Have I been horrible? You wear your little frock; you'll look sweet in it."

"I won't," she replied, a little mollified, "but thank you for the permission."

"You didn't take that rubbish about Gillie seriously, did you? Because I was only joking. As a matter of fact she can't stand me, as you were so quick to notice. I blew her up last night because she forgot to give me your wire till hours after she'd received it, and she's out for my blood."

"Oh, I know that!" said Stacey scornfully, denying him satisfaction, "Your jokes are always very easy ones." She patted his knee.

He took out a pencil, tore a leaf from his notebook and wrote on it, "This is to inform my wife Anastasia that I worship the ground she walks on. Signed: P. Strutt, 2nd Lieut., R.A. X.X.X."

She took it from him, smiled, and held out her hand for the pen. He read her addition: "Of course you do. Why not? No one else would have you. I love you. A. Strutt, Secy. and Housewife."

They kissed each other.

"We're getting so whimsical," said Strutt, over tea, "that I think we shall become just a little nasty in the course of time. Listen, Stacey, when you get back to town I want you to rake round and see if you can get me a fountain pen. I know they're practically unobtainable, but you might just strike lucky. Try the wholesalers and see if you can wheedle one out of them."

"I'll ask Teddy; he's got all sorts of contacts."

Strutt sprang up. "Oh, damn!"

"What?"

"I forgot something. I forgot to ask the B.C. if he really did want me. Went right out of my head. Look here, I think I'll go over now; I'll be back pretty quickly." He

said to himself, Don't be a fool about Ferris, and don't jump whenever she says his silly name. How easy does a bush become a bear. Stacey is Stacey, the same, a carbon copy of all other Staceys. We are quite different from other married couples because we are each a part of the other, incomplete alone. We are true equals, and few men and women can say that without some mental reservation. But I scared her over Gillie ; a cheap trick. Very cheap, to scare Stacey, and very shameful. " Will you be all right ? "

" Of course I will. If I'm not here when you come back, I'll be in the bedroom."

It's all right now, all over. The air swept clean.

" You look nicer in a side-cap than a peaked one," she said, proudly regarding him.

He had not been gone five minutes when Charmian came into the dining-room, walking rather uncertainly, in the manner of the young, as if afraid she might intrude upon a private conversation. She said to Stacey, " Can I get tea here ? "

" Yes, of course. I've just finished mine."

Charmian sat down at the table near the door and looked, from the fireplace, very cold and remote.

" I'm afraid you'll freeze if you stay out there," Stacey said.

" Well, they put me here. It is a bit chilly, though."

" Would you like to share the fender ? It's much more pleasant."

The girl came down the room and sat opposite to Stacey who said, " I'll ring the bell for you, shall I ? It's almost impossible to find it if you don't know the trick." She thought, That little soul is very unhappy.

" Thank you very much. It's nice of you."

" Aren't you Miss Pickering ? The B.K.'s sister ? "

Charmian's smile was diffident and friendly. " Yes. I'm afraid I don't know your name, though."

" Strutt. I'm Philip Strutt's wife."

" I don't know many of the officers. Is he the dark one ? "

" No, Philip's fair." When Lucy came in, Stacey, motherly, gave the order. " Isn't your brother free this afternoon ? This is a bad place to kill time in."

" He had to see the Major. He said he didn't expect to be long."

"That's where Philip is, too. Are you coming to the dance? That seems to be the routine question here."

"Well," Charmian said, "it's the only excitement in a place like this, isn't it? I think Christenhurst must have been terribly dull before the Battery settled here. Claud —my brother—says there's an atmosphere of permanent fever in villages where the army's quartered. The local girls have a chance of some life for once, and hundreds of romances spring up. I suppose," she added quietly, "lots of people are hurt and disappointed, too. Bound to be, when the soldiers move on."

I know what has hurt you, Stacey thought.

When Lucy came in with the tray, Strutt followed her into the room. "Oh, Stacey, you'll never guess what Sadness wanted! He ——"

He caught sight of Charmian.

"This is Miss Pickering," Stacey said.

"Oh, I know. I saw you at Strethamfold in June. What do you think of Christenhurst?"

Charmian meekly replied and afterwards, caught by the prevailing habit, asked him automatically if he were going to the dance.

Cassilis put his head round the door. "Strutty! Mrs. Strutt! Do come and admire my handiwork. I've just finished the hall." Seeing Charmian, he waited till he was introduced to her by Stacey. "Your brother not with you?"

"He had to see the Major. He shouldn't be very long, or I hope he won't be."

"Will you come with us?" Stacey asked her, "the hall's only next door, and you could leave a message."

Charmian rose eagerly, as if she had dreaded to be left alone in the long and silent room, and when she had spoken to Gillie followed Cassilis and the Strutts out into the dusk. Rain had begun to fall, casting a sheen over pavements dimly lit by the moon arising in a nest of ragged and rusty clouds.

Strutt whispered in his wife's ear, "He said it was of no interest to him where I slept to-night, so long as I was on parade to-morrow." "I guessed that might be it," she returned.

Cassilis said, "Mind the step," and drew them through a

double set of black-out curtains into a brilliant light, where they stood for a moment blinking.

"Oh, but this is wonderful!" said Stacey.

He replied, "The only happy day I've had since I've been in the army." He had, with the meagre materials at his disposal, wrought a miracle. On each side of the platform was a slender tree-trunk made of cardboard, from the top of which sprouted a bunch of formalised leaves. On this foliage was superimposed a multitude of round yellow fruits, contrived out of goldflake packets. Against the back-curtain was a marvellous fountain, streaming tinselled water from a cornucopia upheld by a tall bronze negress borrowed by Cassilis from the Geogehans and brought downhill on a handcart, with considerable trouble, by Mangan and Tawney. Along the front of the stage was a deep roll of green-grocer's baize from which, on wires, sprang a frieze of fierce Tahitian flowers.

Strutt said, "That's smashing! Beats me how you did it."

Tawney who, on a ladder propped against the wall, was improving Menhenheott's disposal of the flags, looked downwards. "It's pretty fine, sir, isn't it?" Seeing Charmian, he was silent. For a moment he looked at her, and she at him.

She said, "I think it's more than that."

Cassilis told them the praise should not all be his. "Tawney and Mangan did the work. I only thought it up for them."

"Mr. Cassilis," Tawney said, "was up in the ceiling half the afternoon slinging those trees into place. Our only big job was the coloured lady."

"This should be a very exciting dance," said Charmian.

The B.C. said, "I want to shuffle this Battery round a bit. We're getting stale, anyhow, and could do with a change. I'm going to give Elvorden a troop."

Cameron-Leckie was a man who believed that the quick decisions were the best ones. He had, indeed, decided very suddenly to become a soldier; on leaving 'the Shop,' he had decided with equal suddenness to cease being one, for he perceived that his prospects of advancement were not brilliant, and so he surprised his father, a Bradford merchant,

by following him meekly into the wool-trade. He soon found that his remote Scottish forebears had bequeathed to him, not caution, but the capacity for making dour and effective *coups* once in a while; therefore, without appearing to do very much work, he prospered. When war threatened he went into the Territorial Army, joining a Medium Regiment, and here, too, he soberly prospered. On returning from France he received his crown, and after a while was posted to an Anti-Tank regiment, the commanding officer of which was so impressed by his long silences and his brief spasms of effective action, impressed, indeed, by the whole chiaroscuro of his career, that he promised to send him to the Staff College immediately a vacancy occurred. That was in the early spring of the year. Cameron-Leckie, bogged down in Christenhurst, faced with a long winter of relative inaction for himself and for a hundred and fifty bored men, now considered that the hour had once more arrived for a *coup* of some modest nature.

Pickering shook his head rapidly to and fro, as if somebody had hit him. "Elvorden! Whose?"

"Lilley's."

"Lilley's!"

"Look, Claud: Elvorden's a poor M.T. officer, Lilley's first-rate. Lilley's troop has been going to pieces and Elvorden, though he's a silly youngster in some ways, has the makings of a good soldier. I know. I've got a nose for possibilities. Besides, I think real responsibility might knock a little of that stuffing out of him."

"The men aren't in love with him," Pickering murmured. "Cassilis would be more acceptable."

"Cassilis has no grip. Nice fellow, but no nous. No. But Elvorden has promise. What do you think?"

"I'm inclined to agree with you so far as he personally is concerned, but . . well, sir, I've a personal reason for being worried about Lilley. I had a run-in with him this morning. I'd rather not say what about. He's feeling raw, anyway, and if a blow like this falls on him he may run off the rails."

"What rails?"

"Temperamental ones."

Cameron-Leckie said, as if explaining something to himself, "Damn it, this isn't a punishment. The M.T.'s important, and it takes time. It's a whole-time job. If Lilley's the man

for it, why should he think he's insulted if he's asked to do it ? "

Pickering made no answer.

" You thought that was rhetorical, did you ? "

" Well, sir, he'll think he's insulted, because he's never before been hauled over the coals for the handling of his troop."

" Oh yes, he has," said the B.C., darkly smiling, " I did it." He paused. " Last week. Uneasy ? "

" Am I ? A little."

" What do you think of Lilley personally ? "

Pickering hesitated, " We'll say that I like some other men better."

" Quite. Accepting that as meiosis, I concur. You think I'm acting unjustly out of personal prejudice ? "

" He may think so."

" I cannot," said the B.C., his Scottish accent suddenly obtrusive, " always take recognizance of what Mr. Lilley may or may not think. Tell him I want to see him."

" Not to-night ? "

" Why not ? Certainly. I shall handle him tactfully, I promise you."

Pickering rose. " Very well, sir."

" Tell your little sister I'm sorry I've had to keep you from her for so long. How is she ? I thought she was looking a little under the weather."

" She's not too happy, I'm afraid."

" Why ? What's the trouble ? "

They spoke for a while of personal things.

Bert Lilley, leaving the mess after an interview with the Battery Commander, blundered into two people who were standing outside the Fleece, sidestepped, and without apology walked on. He heard a girl's voice say, " Who was that ? " and Strutt's voice replying, " Our private Führer."

Because she could neither fascinate nor cheat him, Gillie liked Cassilis. She could talk to him, certain all the while that his thoughts would accord her justice, accounting to her words precisely the value that she herself set upon them. While he realised her attraction, she had no attraction for him ; and if he liked her company it was simply because he

knew she spoke to him as to no one else in the Battery. As to a friend. As to an adviser. As to an appreciator, without being an admirer, of her mental trickeries, excuses and apologies. He and Strutt were the only junior officers who, by refusing to use her Christian name, had never made her free of theirs; for this she detested Strutt, who made this reservation because she lacked charm for him, and admired Cassilis who, as she dimly apprehended, preserved by so doing something peculiar and trustworthy in their relationship. Cassilis, she thought, does not make me feel rotten; nor does he make me feel, as Toller does, like something in a church. If I were in great trouble I would ask him what to do.

When he came in at half-past five to enquire if she could give him some tea, as the Fleece had a fire and the mess had none, she brought the tray herself and shared the meal with him.

"Where's Sam?"

"Gone to Grayling to buy a doe."

"Very gloomy these days, Sam." Cassilis bit into a piece of toast, sucking back the grease as it streamed down his chin. "You're very generous with margarine, Mrs. Eagles."

She said with quiet violence, "If *you* think he's gloomy, what do you think he's like to live with? He's been so ever since the Battery moved in."

"Perhaps he's not too happy about you."

"Me? Why not?"

He nodded his head. "All right. Cross out the remark."

She laughed. "Oh well, I suppose I know what you mean. But he doesn't care what I do. It's because he doesn't that I do let myself go a bit. Wouldn't you, if you lived in this hell-hole?"

"'The idiotic life of the country.' That's what Lenin called it. I read it somewhere."

"Not far from wrong." She was not interested. "But wouldn't you?"

"Now look, you've got to be sure which is cause and which is effect. Is Sam gloomy because he thinks you have fun, or do you have fun because Sam is gloomy?"

She said, "Oh, damn Sam," and took his cup away for refilling. The fire crackled upwards, throwing a wildness of flame about the walls. "I say, tell me something."

"What?"

"What's the matter with Bert Lilley?"

"I don't know. Didn't know there was anything. Why?"

"He came racing in here about half an hour ago, asked for tea, said he wasn't going to eat in the bloody mess, and altogether behaved like a madman. Then he got jolly, and said he wanted me to do something for him in return for a consideration."

Cassilis frowned. "Do what?"

"Well, that's just it. I can't tell you. The consideration was a bottle of Coty's *l'Aimant;* he says he knows the tree it grows on." She looked up, smiling a little shamefacedly. "Well, no girl could resist that, could she? Anyway, it was only to play a joke."

"On whom?"

"Can't tell you that, either."

"A funny joke, or a nice, fat, spiteful one?"

She hesitated. "Oh, middling funny, I should think. Do have some jam; I opened a new pot for you."

Cassilis gazed at her, at her features softened by the firelight, her little, bony hands quiet in her lap, her long legs domestically terminated by red woollen slippers.

"What?" she asked him suddenly.

"What was I thinking? That you don't flatter me. For anyone else you'd powder your face and change your shoes."

"That's flattery, in its way."

"I was hoping so." He paused. "Mrs. Eagles, tell me what the joke is."

"I've told you, I can't. I've promised."

"I can't think why loyalty to bad causes should be so admired. Tell you what you can tell me, though. Why you've told me at all."

"That's all very involved," Gillie said petulantly, "and my brains aren't working."

"Why did you tell me there was going to be a joke? There was no need. My guess is that you wanted to safeguard yourself if anything went wrong."

She said nothing.

"Did you?"

"Oh, chase yourself up a tree. You're too clever. What does your own girl think about you?"

"I haven't one."

"No? Why?"

"You're impertinent, Mrs. Eagles," said Cassilis severely. "Did you make that cake?"

"I did, as a matter of fact."

"Don't be so defensive. I don't assume that because a woman has fun she can't make cakes. But be careful about that fun, Mrs. E."

"It's easy for you to talk, knowing that at any time you may move on. If you were stuck here for the rest of your life ——"

"I don't mean fun with the lads. I meant the joke."

"The subject's closed."

"All right," said Cassilis quietly. "Jokes make comedies or tragedies, and if you precipitate the latter don't expect me to sympathise."

"Why should it be tragic?"

"Anything Honest Iago thinks up is calculated to hurt somebody."

"Honest who?"

"He was a bluff, hearty soldier so liked by everyone that no one could imagine him doing the dirty tricks he did do."

"I think you're all down on Bert."

He did not reply. Instead, he began to speak quietly about the village so suddenly galvanised by the impermanencies of war, of the small brief worlds newly created all over the land. He spoke of the lull that lay heavy on England, and of the little frets that might germinate, through its uneasy warmth, into mass crises. "We feel, rightly or wrongly, perhaps more wrongly than we know, that nothing is being done; that the war's a sham; that we're watching Stalingrad from a seat in the stalls. Perhaps, in the minds of most people, the thought's not so clear as that; and yet it's there, rubbing at our nerves. Look at this Battery. Only a handful of men have ever seen active service. They're taken from their homes and planted down in alien corn—not to act, not to relieve the strangeness by action, but to wait indefinitely for God knows what. To go to all the bother of establishing a temporary world. And to make matters more complicated, they're stuck among people to whom this village world *is* permanent, and though they can't destroy it for them, they can shake it till the surface crumbles away. Mrs. Eagles, I'm mixing my metaphors, I think."

Gillie said, "I like to be talked to like that. Nobody does it but you. Not that I understand it all, but it's nice to feel you don't assume that I can't. But you're getting at something, aren't you? What is it?"

"Don't touch off the fuse, that's all."

"I know what I'm doing," she replied impatiently.

He gave her a cigarette. "I must be pushing off. How much?"

"On the house."

"Thank you, no. I'd rather not."

"Have it your own way, then. One and three."

"I thought it was one and six."

"Don't be too proud to accept the threepence," said Gillie scornfully. "See you at the dance. I'll be dropping in about nine."

In the bedroom of the pigly cottage beyond the bridge, Eily Fogg said her prayers. Let me forget I ever thought it, God. I thought of it so sudden it seemed it must be, but God, make me be wrong. Now God, You just listen. Listen, listen, *listen*, will You? I'm praying *hard*. Oh God, I know You're going to make it all right.

She rose. Already she felt better, lighter of heart. That shows you what God can do. Now I'll forget all about it and have a good time at the dance. Vic said he would dance with me. Oh Vic, I love you so! You remember when we were in the pictures, when you pretended to look for the matches in your pocket, so you could touch my hand? Only you pulled away again, and you wouldn't own to it when I teased you. It was so hard to tease, Vic, loving you so much. I never loved *him*, Vic, it was always you. You call me a baby, but you don't know how really old I am; you have to be old to be in love as I love you. Oh Vic, you will look at me properly to-night, won't you? If you knew what *he* thought of me perhaps you'd be jealous. You didn't try to pretend we never went out together, did you? It was wrong of me to say it in front of the men, I know, but I just had to. Perhaps you will be angry with me. If you were I should tremble and be scared, but it would be wonderful. And then you would sweep me into your strong arms and . . . and . . .

She was swept away on a vast golden wind of joy. Throwing herself on to her knees by the side of the unmade bed,

she prayed that God would not let her thought be a true one. because she so wanted to start a new life, to win Vic for her own, to dare his anger for the sake of the wild kissing that would make her his own for ever and ever Amen. No, God, You're the one Who's forever and ever Amen. I do try hard to think about You, but he gets in between.

Nothing is going to spoil to-night. *Nothing.*

She washed her face, took from a drawer the new dress for which she had so long saved up her money. It's a lovely blue. It will make my eyes look bluer. I will do my hair up Edwardian and make my mouth look like a flame as it said in Auntie's magazine.

Mrs. Fogg flung open the door, tottered on the threshold, then slammed out again. A moment later she poked her head back into the room. "Oh, you are there? Didn't see you. Why didn't you say something? That your frock? Make you look like a totty. How much you give?" Picking up a fold of the material she rubbed it between her fingers. Her face was innocent and vague. Then, quite suddenly, she gave Eily's arm a violent slap and screamed at her, "Why didn't you shout you were in here?"

"Stop it. You hurt."

"Serve you right. Where you going in that frock?" Snatching it up, Mrs. Fogg draped it on her breast, using her chin to hold it in place, and in joyless mockery waltzed across the room. "Oh, she's going to the dance! Oh, the lovely young lady, she's going to be a real belle of the ball!" She stopped, crumpled the dress in her hand and held it over the water jug.

"Ma! Give it me!"

"Suppose I pop it in, eh? Wouldn't have nothing to wear, would you? Well, you're not going to wear it, see? —because you're not going to the dance. No daughter of mine's going to make a fool of herself. If you go I go with you, see?—and whenever anyone speaks to you I'm going to say"—she curtsied, adjusted her voice to a high falsetto—'Oh kind sir, do you know how old my darling daughter is? Do you know what a little bitch she is? Do you know that she ——',"

Eily tore the creased frock from her mother's hand, seized her by the shoulders and shook her. "Shut it, ma! Shut it, shut it, shut it! You get out of here, or I'll make you.

I'm stronger than you. You know I am. You're a devil, a devil, a devil!"

Mrs. Fogg allowed herself to grow limp in the girl's grasp. Her eyes slewed upwards, shining and blind. "Oh, you little tiger," she said mildly, "oh, you little cat! Don't you know when your mum's teasing? Can't take a joke, you can't, can't take a joke however it's meant." She shook herself gently free. "I come up for your money. You never give it to me when you come back from Geogehans'."

Eily took five shillings from her purse, gave them to her.

"That all?"

"That's all you'll get now."

"Come on. Come on. Fork."

The girl added another shilling. "That'll have to do. You leave me alone, Ma. You go and enjoy yourself your own way, and leave me to go mine."

Mrs. Fogg put a hand under her elbow, a finger to her chin, bobbed to the ground. "Thank you, fine lady. Thank you, you beauty, thank you, my dear daughter, thank you, thank you, thank you. Have a nice time and see if you can't get the Captain to marry you, so you can have your own Rolls-Royce, you little darling, and one of these days I'll get hold of you and just show you what's what, and what's the right way to behave to your mother, and then you'll be howling for mercy and there won't be none ——"

Eily pushed her out of the room and locked the door. She waited a little while until the fuddled voice had ceased, until the boards groaned beneath the retreating footsteps. She did not at that moment look a child, for her face was seamed by a kind of disgusted grief. To comfort herself she took from under her pillow a little glass bowl on the underside of which was glued a mosaic of tinselled paper, and she fondled this beautiful thing for a while until her heart was still. Then she kissed it, and replaced it lovingly in its hiding-place. "You're the only real treasure I have," she said to it, "and if Ma found you she would smash you."

She crept down to the scullery to iron her dress, and in her preparations for the evening grew merry again.

CHAPTER V

EVENING

SIDNEY MANGAN announced a quick-step, but because it was only the second item of the evening, no dancers took the floor.

As yet the hall was not full, and the expectant girls sat stiffly smiling about the expectant space. On the platform, knee-deep in tropic flowers, the band battered out the tune. Scott, the storeman, was at the piano, Malleson, one of the drivers, at the drums, and a bombardier of A troop, a professional musician, played the saxophone, swaying to and fro like a sapling in a squall of wind, with his body obscuring the marvellous fountain. Cassilis, the first of the officers to arrive, remarked to Tawney that he had never before conceived a décor which bore so little relation to the play. "We might have put the orchestra in loin-cloths, sir," Tawney replied thoughtfully.

The girls sat very straight upon the hard chairs, speaking little one to the other, their eyes turning ever to the men crowded about the doorway. Silver shoes and gold shoes, black and brown street shoes, tapped out the rhythm. The girls were like flowers upon a trellis, yellow and pink and green and blue. Most of them had powdered their faces and two or three had reddened their mouths a little. Their heads were elaborately coiffed; there were curls massed high with a multitude of pins, flowing downwards in equine redundancy, falling soft and Florentine from arterial partings. Coralie Dickens, the grocer's daughter, wore a pink ribbon in her hair, May Budgen a blue. Phyllis and May sat together, their colours complementary. On a chair separated on either side from human intercourse by two empty ones, Eily Fogg sat; her mouth, as she had planned it, was like a flame. She was nervous and fearful, fearful that no one would ask her to dance, and her hands were busy adjusting the neck of her dress, smoothing the skirt, flicking at a rosette upon the bodice. When she remembered to do so she thrust her legs out of sight, because her stockings were laddered. It's not fair that May and Coralie and Clara

have silk ones and I have only these things. Taking a mirror from her bag she regarded the flame, but it gave her poor comfort. The Vicar of All Saints came saintly into the room. His eyes were black, his hair white as lambswool. Though he exchanged a word or two with several of the other girls he had only a cold glance for Eily, and for a panicking moment she remembered the difficult temperament of God.

Alf Conway came in, rolling and elderly, his appearance older by ten years than his age. He slapped Menhenheott so violently on the back that the latter stumbled, and skidded on the greasy floor. Toffit was leaning against the wall, muttering his poem to himself. Tawney and Lejardin were making a last-minute alteration in the drapings of the red ensign above the door, Dakin was sitting alone upon a bench in the corner, his hands hanging loose between his parted knees. Eily smiled at him weakly. He touched his forehead to her, resumed his steady staring at his boots.

It was already warm in the hall, promising intolerable heat later in the evening. The drummer, having pounded the quick-step to a close, leaned back in his chair, drew out a great, patterned handkerchief and wiped his face. Then he took up the wire brush and began to sketch a three-four time, his eyes upon Scott who nodded, dropped his lids and allowed his weight to sink forward again over the keys.

"*Anniversary Waltz*," Mangan shouted, "take your partners for the *Anniversary Waltz*. Come on, lads, don't be shy. Don't let the ladies down."

No one moved. The band played, not to emptiness, but to the ghosts of the evening's future. When the tune came to an end there was a spatter of applause, so the drummer signalled a repeat. After a moment's hesitation two girls rose and began to dance together, moving as gracefully, as remotely across the chalky floor as a cloud across the sky. They were practised dancers, calm in each other's confidence, on their faces neither melancholy nor elation.

"So good together," said one of the men, grinning, "that it seems a pity to break 'em up." No one attempted to do so. The girls drew slackly apart, unclasped their hands. They retired to their chairs against the wall, paying no heed to the pursuant applause.

"The men are slow to-night," said May. "Look at Ron, there, showing them a puzzle. What do they think they

come here for?" He passed the interlocking shapes of metal from hand to hand. "Taking no more notice of you than if you was a bag of flour."

"It's his way," Phyllis replied, without rancour.

"You keen on him? Really keen, I mean?"

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?"

"Well, you're so cold, you are. One never knows with you. He's the only one you've ever even talked about much."

Phyllis powdered her face without consulting a mirror, pushed back a lock of her solid-seeming hair. "He's better than some of them," she said vaguely.

Felse came in, shaking the water from his cape, causing the men within range to spring for shelter. "Pouring cats and dogs outside."

"Will you put that in the cloak-room, Sergeant-Major?" Lejardin said, giving a final tweak to the flag.

"Oh, Lord, I don't want to go in there. This'll be all right in the corner." He rolled it up and threw it down behind a bench. Straightening himself, he looked along the lines of girls, and catching May Budgen's welcoming gaze, very faintly blushed.

She prodded Phyllis Ricks. "There's my hero. You wait till the Paul Jones. No one else is going to get a chance."

"Perhaps they wouldn't want to."

"What, the B.S.M.? It's next best to an officer. Better, really, because they always know more."

"It won't make any difference to you how clever he is in the army."

"Clever in one way, clever in all," said May, inventing an inaccurate proverb. "Oh, look, there's Mr. Elvorden! He's handsome, isn't he, in a soppy way?"

He was Apollo, he was Antinoüs, a slim gilt lad cooling his hands in the Gothic twilight. Cassilis had once remarked to Strutt that no one but an artist could have written him. He towered over Toller who, red and sensitive, fearful that somebody, somehow, might have heard of his interview with the B.C. in the matter of Gillian Eagles, was simulating a profound good humour.

"Glaiden here yet?" he asked Cassilis.

"He may not come. He doesn't dance, or not if he can help it."

"He said he'd be along with Lilley."

"Anything wrong with Lilley? Gillie said he came roaring into the Fleece at tea-time just like a madman."

Toller glanced at him. "Wrong? Don't you know? Sadness has put him back on M.T. and given Elvorden his troop."

Cassilis stared. "Get away?"

"True."

"Who told you?"

"Lilley himself."

"Elvorden knows, of course?"

"I believe he doesn't, yet."

"'Oh, what a surprise,'" Cassilis quoted, looking at the handsome young man who, legs apart, arms akimbo, was surveying the dance with the air of Theseus bending his amused and affectionate attention upon the workmen of Athens.

For they were dancing now, the colours weaving a net of beauty under the lamps. Phyllis was dancing with Mangan, May with Penry Sturgess, the battery clerk, Coralie with Lejardin, who was stumbling her through an intricate routine of steps. Eily sat alone, still further segregated; on either side of her, four chairs were vacant. She had taken out her handkerchief and was rolling it into a ball, unrolling it, folding it in two, and four, and eight, tearing the hem and making knots in it. Her pale face, narrow as a domino box, was stiff with anxiety; the smile pegged across it knew no variation in length, not by a millionth of an inch. She coughed, looked at Dakin, who appeared for a moment as though he meant to cross the floor to her, then turned her head away.

"Poor old Eily," said Tawney to the man next to him, "she's having a thin time."

"Serve her right. She's only a pest round here."

"It seems a shame. I think someone ought to dance with the pathetic brat."

"You go ahead, then. No one else will."

Tawney said, "All right," and sidled round the floor to where she sat, flushed now, but pretending he was invisible. "Miss Fogg, may I have the honour?"

Dumbly she rose and placed herself between his outstretched arms. He drew her into the heat, the haze of the dancers, holding her a little apart from him as if in a ball-

room two score years ago. She slipped on the greasy surface, was caught up again and set upon her feet.

"And what do you think of the floor, Miss Fogg? Not much, I'll be bound."

"Oh, Vic, don't call me that," she said mournfully.

"Who told you to call me Vic? Not I."

"Everyone else does." Then, at last realising that he had chosen her, that she was, in full public view, held in the ring of his arms, she was dazed with glory. Tawney, looking out over her head, and indeed, over the heads of most of them, saw Strutt come in with his wife, Pickering with his young sister. Another nail in my coffin, he thought, when they see me with Eily. Poor little brute, why has Chris deserted her? He was the only one who sometimes behaved as if she were grown up.

He glanced down at her, at her mouth, presented for his admiration on the upturned plane of her face: gesso work. Poor Eily.

"You're looking very glamorous to-night, Miss Fogg," he told her jocularly.

"Am I?" Eily responded, narrowing her eyes at him. I must be a mystery, she thought. Men like women to be mysteries.

"That really is a nice dress." He paused, regarding with some curiosity the expression on her face. "You know, I've been getting into trouble over you."

"Oh, you're angry!" Eily exclaimed, missing a step. Her face was radiant.

He said, surprised, "I am not! What are you looking so pleased about? If I were angry, you'd know it. I'd have the hide off you."

"I dare you," said Eily. The music ceased. She clapped vigorously, imploring an encore. Now let May and Coralie jeer at me; he never asked them to dance.

"I don't take dares."

"You're a coward, then."

"A yellow dog," he agreed. He took her back to the wall, bowed, and left her.

"Paul Jones!" cried Mangan.

Eily was off like a hare, burrowing her way into the swift-forming ring, beating an arc of hands apart that she might insert herself as a third link in the chain.

"Ratata TA te TA te TA,
Tittyty TE ti TE ti TE,"

Mangan sang, parading along the platform's edge, ducking down to pull away a cardboard flower that had become caught in his bootlace.

The rings revolved, clockwise, anti-clockwise. A ring of girls, pink and blue and yellow and green, a solid ring of khaki, the links doubling one upon the other. Each time Elvorden came round the inner ring bunched, and deadlock was momentarily created; he was the first choice of the sliding, skipping, laughing, girls, all lovely in the warmth and their joy.

May whispered to Phyllis, who was strolling past Menhenheott as if she had not seen him, "Felse is a beast; he's not joining in." She lost the hand of the girl next to her, put on speed and recaptured it. "Whoosh! Caught you," she said to Charmian.

Ratata TA te TA te TA
Tittyty TE . . .

The music stopped. Eily, dodged by two men, returned to her chair. Phyllis Ricks and Menhenheott, finding no escape from each other, danced wordlessly. Tawney took Charmian in his arms.

"You're the B.K.'s sister, aren't you?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I thought you were. Have you been to Christenhurst before?"

"No. It's a lovely village, isn't it?" she replied forlornly.

Oh, what's the matter, darling? he thought, You're only a little girl, perhaps no older than Eily, but you are very miserable. "I say, Miss Pickering."

She looked up at him, smiling, polite.

"I should so like to dance with you again," said Tawney quickly, before his resolution deserted him, "but I'm afraid it wouldn't be quite done for me to ask. Would you mind if I did something that wasn't quite done? I'd chance the ducks."

"Well, I ——" She was helpless, not knowing what to say.

"If I ask you later on, you will say yes?"

"Oh, of course," said Charmian, "I ——"

"Here he is," May whispered excitedly, as Felse thrust himself into the coiling fence of men. "Now you watch." She eyed him expertly, with an expert eye observing the band. When he drew near she shot out her arms, placing the girls on either hand at a yard's distance. Instead of moving along she marked time, resisting all attempts to force her onwards. Felse, grinning, switched himself past her. Immediately May dashed after him, jerking the line so violently in her wake that it broke in several places. The drummer signalled a stop. May grasped her prize and bore him off.

"What's this," said Felse, "a kidnapping? Here, here, you're all over my feet. Is this a waltz or a foxtrot?"

"'You are
The promised breath of springtime
That makes the lonely winter
Seem long,'"

she sang, her sentimental treble rising above the music.

"And you're a packet, you are, chasing the men at your time of life."

"Glad I did?"

"I won't say no," he admitted, and blew suddenly upon her ear. She yelped. "That's just to teach you."

"You big bully, you! Just because you can bully those poor fellows you think you can bully me. You wait till I get you next time."

"There won't be no next time."

"Oh, yes, there will," said May.

They were parted for the Paul Jones' second round. She captured him again.

Stacey Strutt danced with her husband. "The finest girl here," he told her fondly.

"Good." She was brisk. "With whom was I dancing last time? A great fat traction engine, all feet. Big red face. Know who I mean?"

"He'll be honoured. That was Mulcaster, our batman. He catches mice with his bare hands. Love me?"

She pressed herself closer to him. They were both exceedingly happy.

Gillie made a dramatic appearance in the doorway, Lilley on her left, Cameron-Leckie, whose simultaneous arrival had been quite accidental, on her right. She wore an ankle-length dress of some dark red cloth, with sleeves reaching to her knuckle-bones, and her hair was combed up and backwards into a fiery bush.

"Oh dear," said Cassilis to the vicar's niece, with whom he was making some degree of solid progress, "Herodias."

She laughed into her neck. "Now, now. Mrs. Eagles is a very striking woman."

"I agree. Don't think I don't agree."

The Paul Jones went on, several times revived by applause. By now the intent of May Budgen had been recognised and both rings were, by common consent, joining in the game, the men forcing Felse towards her, the girls holding her upon one spot until he and she were ready, face to face, for the break in the music.

For the fifth time they danced together, bantering and giggling; but as May for the sixth time took her place in the ring she became conscious that the band was playing much more loudly. Or did the music seem more loud because the talking and laughing had died? Somebody slapped her wrist sharply, separating her from Coralie Dickens; a big woman in navy blue inserted herself between Coralie and May, and when Felse, all unwitting, came prancing jocularly down the room, stepped neatly in front of him.

"*Deep in the Heart of Texas!*" called Mangan.

Felse found himself dancing with his wife.

"I didn't know you were here, Ida," he said, conscious of smiles all around, disembodied smiles settling upon him like a flight of moths, chilling his backbone with their descending flutter.

"I know you didn't," said Mrs. Felse smoothly, her eyes long and cold.

Pickering, who was dancing with Stacey Strutt, explained the reason for the sudden, breathless silence. "I'm afraid the B.S.M.'s lady has been planning a *coup*. Probably her sister told her he'd been seen around with little May; they're hand in glove. Mrs. Felse is a very terrible woman, with a genius for wrecking her husband's prestige."

When the Paul Jones came to an end the dancers drained away from the floor, the sexes for the greater part separating

as cleanly as sieved gold from the disguising sand. The girls flowered again along the walls, the men re-grouped at the end of the hall. Elvorden, who had been dancing with Eily, was brushing himself free from some imaginary contagion. Stacey Strutt and her husband were talking to Cassilis, Charmian and the Battery Captain, Lilley was being very cheerful with Menhenheott, and Cameron-Leckie was showing the latter's wire puzzle to Glaiden, who had just come in. Mrs. Felse had established her husband by her side among the women, putting him, with delicate cruelty, next to May Budgen, to whom he dared no longer speak. Gillie Eagles, oddly enough, was making no attempt to form a group around her. Instead, she leaned against the wall, one hand looping up her skirt, the other smoothing and patting at her marvellous burning hair. Her smile was urbane and conquering, her eyes serene. She was in no hurry to begin her appointed task.

Mangan directed the drummer to command silence, and when it was complete, raised his hand as if to pronounce the benediction.

"Ladies and Gentlemen: Bombardier Fred Toffit is going to give us a recitation. He'll be doing another later in the evening, so he wants to give a serious one first. We all know how good Fred is, so let's give him a hand." He led the applause. "Fred Toffit will now recite *Danny Deever*, by Kipling."

"Oh, Lord preserve us," Elvorden whispered to Cassilis, "what an item for a cheerful hop! I'm going out for a drink."

"You can't do that. It would be noticed."

Strutt murmured, "Don't you bank on it being so bad. You may be surprised. After all, Kipling wrote it for people like Toffit."

Lilley backed out of the door, quietly pulling the curtains to behind him.

Toffit came out on to the platform, took up a stance and gazed with confident melancholy about the hall. He cleared his throat, ran a finger round the inside of his collar.

"He's got a treat for us," said Elvorden.

Yet Toffit was nobody's fool. Somehow, in the hot and brilliant hall, thick with the scents of flesh and face-powder and chloride from the uniforms, he recreated the cold,

bright barrack square with the soldiers drawn up to watch a soldier's hanging. He did not rant, nor labour the double characterisation; he spoke the ballad as a ballad should be spoken, cleanly and simply, leaving the statement of emotion to the strength of the words themselves and to the drumming power of the rhythm in which they were embedded. Only towards the end did some new element become apparent, Toffit adding to Kipling's conception of death in the morning a truth that was his own. He was, for all his bold bearing, a nervous performer, and it was afterwards the subject of much debate whether the effect he created was voluntary or involuntary; but suddenly his voice seemed to move out of control, and the whites of his eyes to shine as if he were seeing, at the far end of the hall, not a tent of flags upraised above the portrait of an unknown and scowling clergyman, but a sheet of blazing sky against which a man kicked his way to death. Upon the last lines his voice declined, but in its softness was perfectly clear, like the sound of the marchers retreating into distance.

He stopped, and perhaps because the second's delay before the applause burst out seemed to him an age, shuffled his feet and glanced at the drummer, as if expecting him to re-start the music as a covering for failure.

Stacey whispered to her husband, under cover of the clapping, "You know, he did that very well—and do you know, I don't think I shall forget it in a hurry? Even if it did bring the death's head to the feast."

Pride rose in him, soothing and warm. How fine of Stacey to say at once what he had been thinking but would never have dared to voice lest he make an ass of himself. "Not bad, eh?" he beamed at her.

Then Gillie dropped her skirt hem, lifted her long red arm and waved to him.

"Hullo there, Philip!" she cried, all smiles and Americanized enchantments.

Lilley was back in the hall, an unhappy demon king drawing comfort from his small revenge.

Strutt, taken aback, said "Oh, hullo, Mrs. Eagles," and Stacey stared at him, her face blank with surprise.

Gillie moved towards them, walking beautifully in her red cloud. "Formal devil, aren't you?" She put her

forefinger to the pip on his shoulder. "Ting-a-ling-a-ling. *Come* in!" She passed on, light as air.

Mangan announced, "Ladies' Excuse-Me dance!"

Gillie turned and swept back again, to carry Strutt out on to the floor.

Stacey, speechless, baffled, forced a smile. Philip, Philip, Philip! When were you telling the truth? When you said she didn't like you, or when you said she did? Oh, no, no, this is absurd. Not after five years of marriage. Panic curdled her thoughts. Please, somebody, ask me to dance, because obviously *I* can't ask a man, and I shall just have to sit here and watch her and him. Damn the girl, she's whispering to him! Philip, I'm ashamed of you. Oh course it is all very silly. I shall tease you about this later on. Stacey began to formulate her thoughts very carefully so as to obscure the amazing, ridiculous undertow of misery.

Then Cassilis said, "Mrs. Strutt, wouldn't you like to invite me?" and she rose with such frank gratitude that he understood in a flash what Lilley's joke had been. Lilley and Gillie. Silly.

Eily Fogg rose from her chair, and with blind determination made her way to where Tawney stood. As she was passing, Dakin caught at her dress. "Ask me."

"Let me go."

"Eily, don't be silly. He doesn't want you."

"He does."

"He does not. You're my girl, aren't you?"

It was a surreptitious exchange, whispered, marked by few.

In that moment Tawney was claimed by May Budgen, who was determined to show Mrs. Felse that the latter had in no way spoiled her pleasure.

"You beast!" said Eily, and her eyes spurted sudden tears. Dakin, seeing this, rose and waltzed her into the thick of the crowd.

"Shut up, now. Stop it. Don't be a silly girl. What have I done to you, anyway? Don't think he likes you just because he paid for your pictures. He was laughing about it with the men. I need you, see? I need you. I've understood you, haven't I?"

"I don't want you any more," she said, breaking away from him, "you've done too much," and she ran towards

Elvorden, claiming him a second before Coralie Dickens had the courage to do so.

"Listen, young lady, I'm not playing this game," he protested.

"Oh yes, you are, yes, you are," she told him, in her agitation achieving a degree of painful and irresistible insistency. He glanced ruefully at Lilley, who merely said, "What a lucky lad you are, Saint Ives." Elvorden wearily opened his arms, smiling wearily at her when, too small to place her hand comfortably upon his shoulder, she let it rest upon his sleeve, the little chewed nails pitiful against the fine cloth.

Coralie, emboldened by defeat, sought out the Battery Commander, who surprised and saddened, could not for the sake of appearance refuse her, and as they moved away from the side lines she made triumphant faces over his sleeve at her friends.

Mrs. Felse chose her own husband at once. Phyllis Ricks walked without haste towards Menhenheott.

Gillie gazed into Strutt's face. He saw the delicate graining of skin, the faint glaze of powder adhering to her lashes, the purplish demarcation line between the outer and inner flesh of her lips. She was singing the words of the tune in a fashion copied from a dance band vocalist, and as Stacey and Cassilis passed nearby stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, "Don't you think I ought to be a crooner?"

He was puzzled and angry. Stacey, catching his eye, gave him a bright, brief nod of encouragement. Gillie caressed his shoulder, played upon it a five-finger exercise.

"Look here, Mrs. Eagles," he said, "is this some joke?"

"Joke? What is? I don't understand." Her eyes rounded in innocence.

He searched for words—You're not always so pleasant to me.

Now honestly, we don't like each other much, do we?

Why are you going out of your way to pretend some intimacy between us?

—and rejected them as foolish, lowering to pride and dignity. "Never mind," he said, and tried, as if he were dancing with himself, to take no notice of her. Ducking her head, she giggled delightedly.

The tune changed. "*Boomps-a-Daisy!*" cried Gillie, "Now watch me go to town!"

The B.C. said to Coralie Dickens, "I'm afraid this is all a little beyond me. I don't know this dance."

"Oh, I'll teach you," she replied confidently, and hurled herself against him, causing him to stagger. "'Hands, knees, and'—you're doing it fine!" He revolved in the wrong direction, made an unchivalrous move to leave the floor and was haled back again by Coralie, who, with renewed zest, threw herself at his hip.

"The B.C. is pondering the possible effect of this upon the junior officers," Cassilis told Stacey, who was looking depressed, "but he's such a good fellow he could dance the cancan without affecting discipline. Oh Lord, look at that! Someone's taken Elvorden from Eily Fogg, and she's seized on to Blanco."

"Who's Eily Fogg?"

"A sad case," he replied shortly. "You've heard of very young girls who hang around camps bothering the men? Eily is our cross."

"How old is she?"

"About sixteen, I suppose. I say, Charmian's taken Tawney from May Budgen. Her brother won't like that. It looks bad. But I suppose she didn't know."

"Charmian? Is that Miss Pickering?"

He nodded.

Stacey added shrewdly, "I'm quite sure that she did know, and that she's doing it purposely, out of . . . of grace."

"Grace? That's a funny word."

"I mean—Oh, dear, I can't do this stamping waltz. It's hideous."

"Try."

"I mean, she's doing it because she likes the look of Tawney and won't pay any attention to this 'rank' snobbery."

"You're disgusted," he said. "Not with the little Charmian, of course; with the niggling subtleties of what one does and doesn't do. I won't say I disapprove of you for that." He added gently, "Mrs. Strutt, your husband is very fed up with Herodias."

"With whom?"

"Mrs. Eagles. I think she must be behaving like that

for some curious bet, because she can't stand Strutty as a rule. She can't stand him because he won't play ball with her."

"I haven't noticed her behaviour," said Stacey gallantly. "but I must certainly do so now you've mentioned it." Her face, nevertheless, had cleared. "Oh, a veleta! I'm quite good at that." She danced on winged feet.

Tawney said to Charmian, "That was exceedingly nice of you, but I'm afraid your brother won't be pleased."

"You said he might not like it if you asked me, so I thought it would be better if I asked you." She looked gravely at him. "You don't look very happy. Have I done something wrong?"

"Oh, please don't think that!" He was urgent. "I'm sorry if I'm a blight upon the festivities, but it has quite a different cause."

"I'm not very happy myself," said Charmian.

"I'm sorry," he replied, admiring the bright parting between the two dark wings of her hair. "We'll console each other a little, I hope." Diffidently he added, when they had danced for a while in silence, "After the war—or even during it, if they should make me a General—will you one day come out to dinner with me? I'm afraid I'm being very sudden, but there's not much time left in the world to-day." He looked across her head at Gillie Eagles, knew Gillie for what she was; yet found in this knowledge no salve for the ache of love. So it's Strutt now, is it? Strutt, of all people. Not nice for his wife, who's a pretty girl, worth a score of Gillies. Yet I shouldn't have thought it of him.

Charmian followed his gaze, and because she was very young said, "I wonder if we have the same kind of trouble?"

Pickering, seeing them together, was not displeased. Tawney, indeed. I thought it might be Elvorden. But she has taste.

Phyllis Ricks said to Menhenheott, "Cat got your tongue?"

"You should have left me alone. You should see where you're not wanted."

"No hope, then? Maudie for ever. Three cheers."

"I'm in love with Maud."

"What rubbish. Of course you're not."

"I'll do you some hurt one day, if you don't let me be."

The Quartermaster, as he passed by, was telling a girl about a death in the desert.

"Lying again," said Menhenheott. "I suppose somebody believes him sometimes."

"Was he in France?"

"Yes. Wish I'd been."

"You might have been dead by now."

"I should cry. Here, if you talk so much you can't dance proper. Pick 'em up, pick 'em up!"

She laughed and put out her tongue at him.

"But I'd like to see service," he went on, "I'd like to get abroad. This hanging-about drives me nuts."

"Surely you don't want to leave Maudie?" she gibed.

"You shut up about Maud."

The long dance came to an end.

Gillie, returning with Strutt to the group of officers, extended a general invitation to the Fleece. "Because I've got to go back for the last hour. Can't leave Sam quite high and dry. You coming, Saint Ives? You, Clifford? Philip?"

"I don't know," Strutt said shortly. He whispered to Stacey, "Let's go to the Lamb for a bit. There's a quiet back parlour, and I don't much think I want to hear Menhenheott's cornet solo."

She fetched her coat and they went out into the driving, moonshot rain. He put his hand under her elbow. "Get a move on or we'll be soaked. Careful, there's a step here."

They ran blindly across the road, pushed open a door and came into a little firelit room, bright with brasses and glinting china. It was empty. Strutt pulled back the scarf from his wife's wet face and kissed her. Then he looked at her speculatively, a little afraid. "Well?"

She sat down, stretching her hands to the heat. "You get me a drink, first."

"What do you want?"

"Well, I'm a bit damp. A small whisky, I think."

He went out into the passage, to the little bar from which three rooms were served, and presently returned bearing the glasses, which he set down carefully upon the fender.

"Now then."

"You're expecting me to ask questions about that flash

young woman of yours, aren't you?" Stacey amiably suggested.

He blew out his lips. "It would be natural. Will you start, or shall I?—I think I will. I assure you that she's never behaved like that before in her life, and I don't understand it. It was a bad show, and it put me in a damned awkward position. I swear I told you the truth; she's never liked me. And you've never caught me telling lies, have you?"

Stacey began to laugh. "All right, all right, I believe you. I believe you, because Cassilis went out of his way to confirm what you've said. He was very anxious for me to take things the right way. He said he thought she was doing it for a bet."

"Oh, thank God for Eric!" he exclaimed, and drained his glass. "Come and sit by me. Come on." He put his arm round her. "I say, did he just guess it was a bet, or did he seem to know anything?"

"I thought he sounded as if he knew something."

"But who'd put her up to a damned thing like that? It was in the worst of taste."

"Don't ask me. Who doesn't like you?"

"I don't know. Lilley doesn't like anybody, except possibly Elvorden, who to a minor extent shares his horrible political views, and Toller hates the younger men on principle; but I can't see either of them playing fool games on me for no cause."

"'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,'" Stacey murmured, unwittingly ordering that *Othello* be quoted in Christenhurst for the second time in one day.

"What is?"

"Oh, I don't know. The lull in the war. Anyone might do anything to make a diversion."

"Now you're being silly," said Strutt. "Listen, I've something else to tell you. About to-day."

"The fluctuations in temperature? Misery on the football field, joy renewed at tea-time, misery at the dance—" She flushed. "Oh, yes, I was rather miserable at first. Gillie made me feel so cheap. I recovered after I'd talked to Cassilis. So you see, I am human."

"So am I," he told her, "and I want to make a clean breast. I've been jealous of you. Isn't that a tomfool thing to be?"

"Yes, I think it is. Why, though?"

"Ferris. You've been stuffing your letters with him. You see, I'm so far away, and he has you every day . . . It is tomfool, isn't it?"

She said slowly, "Good God, and a hundred little fishes. I'm ashamed of you."

He said defensively, "Well, damn Ferris anyway. I don't want daily bulletins about him."

"Philip, I have so little news for you! Days are so much the same since you went away. I just think up any little thing that might seem amusing. Ferris doesn't care a bean for me. He takes me out and calls me by my first name because he admires American executives and wants to be like them, but he's entirely disinterested. I should be very miserable if I felt you were worrying about me and not trusting me." She spoke quietly, turning the glass round between her fingers. "Please don't do that. There is nobody but you and never could be. Do you believe me?"

"I'm impossible," he said. "Yes, of course I believe you. I'm sorry."

She laughed. "And Mrs. Eagles is frustrated, and the comedy ends with a bergamask."

"Very literary to-night," he commented, gratefully kissing her cheek. "Clever wife I've got. Have another?"

"Please."

Elvorden put his head into the room. "Oh, I'm sorry. Thought there was no one in here."

"Come in! It's nice and quiet after the row in the hall. Let me introduce my wife. What are you having?"

"Old and mild, thanks." The boy looked flushed and excited. When Strutt returned with the drinks he said, "I say, I've got Lilley's troop."

"What?"

"He's just told me. Says the B.C. told him he was putting him on to M.T. because there was a mess-up at the park, and it needed whole-time attention. I was to take the troop over."

"And I gather Lilley's not pleased," said Strutt.

"Well, he's putting up a good show. Of course, he lets his lads get a bit slack; they made an awful botch-up at Battery gun-drill last week, and I know the B.C. created about it, as the servants say."

"Quick leg-up for you."

"Oh, I'm not all that keen," Elvorden murmured, trying not to appear so, "it just means a lot of hard work and no rewards."

"Isn't it a reward if the men like you and do a good job for you?" Stacey asked him, and then was afraid she had been priggish.

"Like you? I don't think that goes for much. Point is, do they respect you? That's what counts. Iron hand, you know. Old gag, but still effective." He laughed uncertainly.

"I'm sure they'll respect you tremendously," she said, her eyes wide and gentle.

"Does one really respect people one doesn't like?" Strutt wondered, "I'm only asking."

"They respect the British in India," Elvorden told him, "though a lot of 'em don't like us. My father was out there for years, and he says so."

"You know," Stacey said, "I think I'd almost rather be loved." She drank. "I shall be schwipps after that. I drink very little."

"Schwipps? That's a good word. I'll remember that." Elvorden rose. "Must be getting back; I said I'd go and comfort Gillie at the Fleece. Not much fun for her, having to leave these dances so early. You'd think that husband of hers could manage on his own. He's old enough and ugly enough."

When he had gone Stacey said, "Does he come here often?"

"Good Lord, no. This is probably the first time. He came in to tell me about his troop, because he heard us say we were going here. Won't he be cock-a-hoop, scoring over Lilley!"

"He's a beautiful young man, but I can't stand him."

"He's a very efficient one, all the same. It would be nice if all the good soldiers were the pleasant ones, but that's not so. I wish it were. Shall we go back and dance a bit, or would you rather go home? You're looking a bit fagged."

"Now that we are reconciled," said Stacey cheerfully, "and the world is gay, I think I'd like to dance for half an hour more. Besides, I promised a dance to Cassilis. If you were jealous in that direction, my boyo, there'd be some sense in it."

They made the dash back again to the hall.

Ron Menhenheott finished his solo and was applauded. He jumped down from the front of the platform, strode across the hall to where Phyllis Ricks awaited him and without a word put her mackintosh around her shoulders and took her out into the street. They walked in the lee of the houses until they came to the bridge, where they climbed the low parapet on to the bank and slid gently down it to the narrow stone ridge that ran along the inside of the arch.

There they stood together, silent, angry with love, the length of her body to his. "You see," said Phyllis Ricks, after a while.

"But this is the last time, Phyl; it's got to be. You'd think I was a poor sort of chap if I let a girl down, wouldn't you? You'd be wondering afterwards if I was going to do the same to you."

"No. Because you'd love me, and you don't love her. What made you ask her?"

"She's such a little thing," he replied unwillingly, "and her ma gives her a life of it. Not unkind, exactly; just pretends she's an invalid and has Maud running after her the whole ruddy time. Besides, Maud's pretty. She's the prettiest girl you ever saw." He stood Phyllis off from him, began to steer her back on to the sodden bank of the stream. "Last time, Phyl. Honest. You've got to help. The war'll be over soon, and you'll forget about me."

"Would you forget me?"

"Never you mind what I'd do," said Menhenheott. They clambered up the slope, gripping for support at tree-roots and tufts of grass. "How old's Eily Fogg?"

"Why?"

"I wondered."

"Don't know, because she wasn't born here like the rest of us. Came with her ma from Sussex only about eighteen months ago, but they're London people, really. She went to live at Strethamfold with her auntie at the start of the year because her ma was drinking so bad." Phyllis spoke of Eily as they walked along, giving her attention to the matter as if they had been a settled couple with time for something other than love. As they reached the hall Men-

henheott said, " You do understand that this won't happen any more ? "

" The things you say," she laughed, and stepped in before him, her face fresh and glowing with the night wind, a beading of rain upon her hair and her glossy cheeks. He watched in joy and utter despair.

Tom Glaiden returned, not too sober, to the dance and because he was unsure of himself went to talk to the vicar's niece, who was the person farthest removed, by distance, from the Battery Commander. " All alone ? Can I sit here and talk to you ? " He took refreshments for her and for himself from a tray offered by one of the drivers. " Good dance to-night."

" They all seem much the same to me."

" Oh, come, come, come, Miss Steed, not a grateful attitude. Surely the army's put a bit of life into the village?"

" You'd be surprised how much life there is in a village, even without the army."

" Murky scandals ? " Glaiden suggested, grinning.

" We have our meed of them. But we have pleasant excitements too."

" Oh, I'm sure you do. Pleasantest in the world. So you'd as soon have our room as our company ? "

" I didn't say that," Miss Steed replied rather stiffly. " If our hospitality to the troops is helpful to the country's war effort, then we're grateful indeed for the army."

" Rebuked," said Glaiden, " crushingly rebuked." He looked so sad that she smiled at him.

" Cheese straws," said Mulcaster, pushing a tray into his face, " Very nice, sir. Cook-house special, sir."

Miss Steed said she really didn't think she could refuse.

The band was returning now to the platform, and the hall refilling. Gillie Eagles had gone. Strutt and his wife had just come in. Charmian and her brother were talking to Toller. The Battery Commander had left. Eily Fogg was sitting very straightly in her chair, staring with hunger and love at Victor Tawney. Phyllis Ricks and May Budgen, their arms intertwined, were using the floor as a skating rink. Blond hair and chestnut blew up in the speed of their going. The Quartermaster, having disentangled Menhenheott's puzzle, was tossing the pieces into the air and

roaring with triumph. Mangan came on to the platform and announced a Spot Waltz.

Miss Steed looked expectantly at Glaiden, who rose and excused himself, saying that he had to clean up some business at the battery office before turning in. He threaded his way through the dancers, meaning to have a last drink at the Fleece before closing time, but on his emergence from the hall found a silent knot of men staring after some incident that had passed from view. Their attitudes were so strained, their faces so awestruck in the revealing moonlight that he said sharply, "What's up, here?"

There was silence, while they glanced covertly at one another. "Nothing, sir," said somebody at last. Feeling uneasily that whatever they considered none of his business might be his business indeed, he walked on a few steps, colliding with Elvorden who was standing motionless on the edge of the pavement. "What's on? What's all the excitement?"

Elvorden replied softly, slowly, and in great wonder, "I saw it. I saw it just as I came up. Lilley bust Cassilis on the jaw."

CHAPTER VI

SUNDAY: BEFORE BLACK-OUT

"SOLDIERS, who are Christ's below,
Strong in faith resist the foe:
Boundless is the pledg'd reward
Unto them who serve the Lord."

"Hypocrisy," said Strutt to his wife, under cover of the singing. He was happy, and when he was happy he was always belligerent.

The front pews were occupied by the officers, the back pews by the men who, a homogeneous mass of khaki in a strong draught, filled that area of church between the west and eastern doors and the font. The sun, for the morning was bright after rain, slanted through the diamond panes on to the chrysanthemums banked about the foot of the lectern, which was shaped grotesquely, like an enraged bird,

etherialised the faces of the choir-boys, Christenhurst lads and demons to a man-jack of them, and glistened upon the sleeked head of a visiting padre, who for some reason had come to church in riding-breeches and was sitting in a special pew a little below the choir-stalls.

"Be quiet," Stacey whispered, adding, "Why?"

"Hypocrisy to choose this hymn for our sort of soldiers. They aren't the sort the writer meant."

"'Tis no palm of fading leaves
That the conqueror's hand receives;
Joys are his, serene and pure,
Light that ever shall endure."

The singing was thin, for the men took little part in it and the burden was carried by local worshippers. Gillie Eagles, in a black dress tuckered with white, bent over her velvet-bound hymnal and would pay no attention to Toller's sidelong smiles. She wore little make-up and her mouth formed a pink O of praise as she sang.

"Menhenheott always brings his wire-puzzle," Strutt murmured. "If they really want to choke religion in England, compulsory church parades are just the way to do it."

"Still, we are a Christian country. Do be quiet; the Major's looking at you."

"He's blind without his glasses." Strutt felt wonderfully eased and calm, as if he had been that morning unlocked from the cage of La Balue; it was always so when Stacey was with him once more. "Oh yes, and Toffit learns his recitations. He mutters the whole time, so Elvorden thinks he's devout."

She nudged him. "Talk of the devil."

Elvorden came up the aisle, treading as softly as he could over the resounding flags. He was no longer a boy. The playing-fields bloom had left his cheeks, which were now the colour of natural linen, and his mouth was stiff as if he had just come from the dentist. Slipping into an empty pew, he leaned for a moment over the ledge, in prayer. Then he opened his hymn-book and rose to join the congregation.

Stacey whispered, "What on earth ——?"

"Search me. He was looking like death at breakfast."

"Bad news, do you think? From home?"

"Couldn't be. No mail on Sundays, and I know no wires have come for him."

The final, the sermon verse was sung.

"Be the banner still unfurl'd,
Still unsheathed the Spirit's sword,
Till the kingdoms of the world
Are the kingdom of the Lord."

"Neat," said Strutt, "shows an international spirit," and sat down. There was a noise of settlement, of long exhalations, grunts, coughs and scraping boots. "The vicar's never longer than fifteen minutes. Toffit can learn twenty lines in that time."

The sermon proved no lengthier than he had predicted. At the end of it, when she knelt to pray, Stacey thanked the Lord for her success in matriculation, her escape from an unfortunate engagement, her two escapes from bombing, and for the gift of a satisfactory husband. She had prayed at sixteen for the examination success, at nineteen for some *deus ex machina* to prevent her marriage to Denis Northcrop, and at twenty-four for the bombs to drop elsewhere. All these petitions had been granted, and she was ever grateful. Out of pure contentment and a desire that others should be as happy as she, she prayed sincerely and forcefully that whatever was troubling Elvorden should go away and leave him alone.

"Look here," Strutt said, when the final hymn was sung and they rose to leave the church, "I've got to march the lads back again now, so you go to the Fleecee and wait for me, will you? We'll have lunch together."

She asked him suddenly, "What's the matter with Cassilis?" and pointed towards the west door, by which the latter was leaving.

"Matter?"

"He's got sticking-plaster on his chin."

"Oh, that. He slipped and fell last night, when he went out during the dance, and cut it on the parapet of the bridge. Made him feel groggy, so he went straight home to bed."

"Looks as though someone had hit him."

"He'd have told me pretty quickly if they had," Strutt replied.

Outside in the churchyard, Felse was parading the men. Stacey watched her husband, admired the set of his shoulders, thought how greatly the army had improved him. He used to slouch and turn his feet in. She thought—And this afternoon we're going into Strethamfold for tea, and we'll see a film and hold hands in the dark. Then, to-morrow, I'll go home and it won't be long before he gets forty-eight hours. And perhaps he'll never go abroad; the war might be over before they send him. If he went I couldn't bear it. But of course I should have to bear it; there would be nothing else for me to do. Two years already cut out of our lives by this war. She shivered, thinking of the bitter waste. Not so bad for the very young people; but I am twenty-six and Philip is twenty-seven, both of us coming to full maturity and enjoying the calm of formed opinions, accepted ways of living. Now that we have learned to live together we are made to live apart.

But if you did live together, my good girl, and no one went to war, England would be made a slum in hell, without pleasure, without dignity, without hope, a slum into which no one but a brute would bear a child.

It occurred to her then, in a revelation of joy, that she might at last be pregnant. Yes, it could be. She counted, calculated. They had decided, for the first three years of their marriage, to have no children, as both were working and money was scarce; then when Strutt passed his final architect's examinations and prospects improved, they assumed that the child would come to their wish. It had not. After two years of hoping, Stacey's hopes had all but faded. But now? I have been feeling depressed lately, have been crying for no reason. On the field yesterday I could have died of misery, and all for no cause. Oh, let it be! Let it be!

And she knew, even in the midst of her prayer, that it was so. She was shaken by a vast love and pride. The men had left the churchyard now and the vicar was standing gossiping at the door, his surplice blowing in the bright blue wind. A flock of doves wheeled in the sunlight and of a sudden were shining gold. A little black dog ran yapping up the path in pursuit of a leaf. I shall see that

white linen, and those doves, and that little dog until the day I die.

Fearful of spoiling the glory by gazing upon it a moment longer, she went down the path between the clippered yews and walked slowly back to the Fleece.

When church parade was dimissed, Glaiden came up to Strutt. " Look, Strutty, I want a word with you. Urgent. Walk along the lane with me, will you ? We'll be quiet there."

" Really urgent ? Because my wife's waiting for me."

Glaiden said, " Very. Please, Strutty. I want your advice and I want it badly. I'm asking you because I think you're a sensible cuss." As usual, his eye was glassy and his hands a little unsteady ; but this morning there was a new uncertainty in his face and he seemed desperately worried.

" Only ten minutes, then. Here, Mulcaster ! Drop in at the Fleece, will you, and ask Mrs. Eagles to tell my wife that I'm delayed but that I won't be longer than I can help ? "

He allowed Glaiden to lead him into the lane that ran between the village and Grayling Wood, a cart track cutting through a cylinder of dense greenery. " Quiet enough here for you ? Now what ? "

" I suppose Cassilis has told you."

Strutt twitched his forehead. " Told me what ? "

" Oh, Lord, then he didn't." Glaiden walked in silence for a few yards, and stopped by a fallen tree. " Here, let's sit down."

" It's sopping."

" I've got my mack." He spread it over the bark, and they sat. " Didn't you notice Cass's chin ? "

" Of course, but ——— "

" Didn't he tell you how he got it ? "

" Stumbled on the kerb by the bridge and socked himself on the parapet."

Glaiden said slowly, " He didn't get it that way, Strutty, I'm worried out of my mind and I don't know what to do. Last night, during the dance, Lilley and Cass went out for a chat. Elvorden saw them standing at the entry of the passage between the draper's and Hoadley Cottages. He wasn't paying a lot of attention to them, naturally, and then

all of a sudden, he saw Lilley reach out and clip Cass on the jaw. Cass sort of rocked back against the wall and shouted something, and Lilley did a bunk up the hill towards the M.T. park."

"Oh, Christ," said Strutt. "Who saw? Only Elvorden?"

"Wish it had been. No. There was a group of the men outside the hall, getting a breath of air—you know how stifling it got, about half-time. They were standing just in the lee of the wall, out of the rain, and I suppose neither Lilley nor Cass spotted them. When I came out they were staring across the road at nothing—the men, I mean—just as if they'd seen the world turned upside down."

"What men?"

"Well, I saw Lejardin, McInnes and Backman, and Elvorden says Cray and Fielding were there too. That's five."

Strutt lit a cigarette, offered the packet to Glaiden, who waved it away. "Lord help us, what a bloody schemozzle. And we know what it will mean for Lilley."

"It means he'll be broke. Court Martial. Either dismissed or cashiered." Glaiden shook himself violently, as if he were cold or wet. "Poor devil. Oh yes, I'm sorry for him. I'd be sorry for anyone who got in that kind of mess. 'There, but for the grace of God . . .' You wouldn't suppose there'd be the smallest chance of the men keeping quiet?"

Strutt replied out of wishful thinking, well knowing in his heart what the true reply should be, "Perhaps a minute one." He hesitated, aware that his words were nonsensical. "Perhaps a faint hope, because they don't know we know —or do they?"

"No. They certainly wouldn't come across when I asked them what was up, and I don't think they saw Elvorden. Of course, you know what the army is; it circulates stories as freely as cold germs. Still, we must hope."

Strutt encouraged this optimistic spirit out of the kindliness shown by persons who try to convince a chronic invalid that he will soon be well. "It's rotten bad for discipline, I know, but I'm damned if I see how we can move in the matter. Only make a scandal far more damaging to the mess than if we kept our mouths shut. I take it you think we should keep them shut?"

"Oh, yes," Glaiden said bitterly, all optimism suddenly

deserting him, "but you don't know Mister Elvorden. Perhaps his troop's turned his head; I give it up. However . . ." He paused, for the while losing his words. He gazed up at the ceiling of boughs through which, at every moment, a greater area of sky became visible as the brittle leaves fell from the stem, looked down again and scraped the mud off one shoe with the toe of the other. "However, Mister Elvorden says it's his duty to report it. However unpleasant, he says, it's his duty. He doesn't care what the consequences to himself will be, not he; not with the honour of the regiment at stake." He added slowly, "And I'm not saying he's altogether wrong."

"Well, I am saying it," Strutt retorted, perversely convinced of the rightness of his own judgment, now that Glaiden had rejected it. "Where will it get us? A nice, full-dress army scandal. All in the newspapers. Our battery's name mud with the other batteries—though I admit that's in the nature of an anti-climax. If nothing's said, then what? Say a seventy per cent chance of it getting around."

"Put it at eighty."

"Eighty, then. But if the twenty per cent chance turns up and it *doesn't* get around, it will simply be a nine days' scandal in the barrack rooms. Lilley will get such a shock that he'll probably turn over a new leaf. The person to complain, if any complaint's to be made, is Cass; and he wouldn't even tell me. You make Mister Elvorden shut his mouth."

"Oh, no," Glaiden said ironically, "that's too big a task. He's worked out all his speeches. He's going to do his duty." A large snail, beautifully pied in cream and bronze and black, attracted his attention. Stooping, he removed it gently from the roadway and set it upon moss. "Get run over, you silly little basket," he warned it.

"I don't know what you want *me* to do."

"You? Oh, you've already done it. I wanted advice on the moral issue, and you've confirmed my own opinion. Or perhaps I should say my own worse judgment; I'm still not too sure that Elvorden's not right." He added, as if to himself, "But I'm not backing him. I may be a soak but I'm not, as yet, a stool-pigeon. Of course, I may become anything as the years roll on." As Strutt, embarrassed,

made no comment, Glaiden said, " I wasn't always this way. You've heard those tales about one bomb making you deaf, and the second one making you hear again ? Dunkirk bust up my nerve, but another bout of action might restore it. Who knows ? Anyhow, that's what I hope ; but Lord help us, how I dread the prospect of putting it to the test ! " He rose, jerking up his mackintosh from beneath Strutt. " All right, then. I get to work on Saint Ives. What a good name ! When Gillie gave it him, she was wiser than she knew."

" Let's get this straight once more ; how many know about all this ? "

" Apart from the protagonists, only you and me and Elvorden. And, of course, the five men ; rather a lot of ' onlies,' I'm afraid. Of course, Cass and Lilley haven't the slightest idea yet that anyone saw them, unless Elvorden's told them by now."

" I'll try talking to young Ives myself, if you like ; two bullies are better than one. He doesn't like me much, but he'll listen to me sometimes."

" That's because you're the Battery's bright boy," Glaiden said, as they walked back towards the village. " Know what ? I'd have had my third pip six months ago, if it hadn't been for my funny little ways. However, I still have Hedy Lamarr." He patted Strutt's shoulder. " Good old Strutt. You're sound. I like you. By the by, you obviously won't mention all this to Cass."

" Shan't tell anyone."

" Except that pretty wife of yours. Oh, I know. Wives learn a lot, and it seldom does much harm if you pick your wife carefully. I'd tell her myself, if she were my wife."

" You're not married, Glaiden ? "

The blond man laughed and stared. " Married and unmarried twice. The first I couldn't stand, the second couldn't stand me. Not bad work in six years, eh ? " They parted. Strutt hurried along to the Fleece.

" Oh, Philip, Philip ! " Stacey cried when he came up to the bedroom, where, for warmth's sake, she had sat reading, " Such a lot to tell you ! I really think at long last, that—— "

" Not so much as I've got to tell you," he rejoined, gloomily casting his cap and belt on to the counterpane.

He related the story of Lilley and Cassilis, was disappointed when she received it without excitement. "You don't understand, Stacey. This is catastrophic. This is a problem of first magnitude."

"Yes," she said patiently, "I know it is, and I see all the implications; but Philip, I really think we're going to have a baby at last."

He stared. "No!"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"Nearly. Anyway, it seems on the cards. I'll see Kerrigan as soon as I get back, and make sure. Are you pleased?"

"Now look here, don't get yourself worked up. You'll feel shocking if you have made a mistake."

"Woman's instinct. I just know."

"Woman's nothing; but I hope you're right. How long?"

"Two months, of course."

"Well, you'd better stop riding that bicycle," said Strutt practically, "I'd feel far better if you didn't, any old how." He smiled, all thought of Lilley faded into air. "Oh, darling, this is really good!"

On Sunday mornings Eily worked at the big house from nine until twelve-thirty, so as a rule her mother, who never rose until ten, did not see her before dinner-time. To-day, however, as Eily came back along the street, Mrs. Fogg scuttled from the public bar of the Lamb and shouted, in a voice that echoed about the hillsides, "What time did you get home last night?"

Menhenheott, passing by with Toffit, touched her arm. "Keep your hair on, Ma, she was back before eleven and we formed a guard of honour to see she got back safe across the road."

Eily looked at him in enormous gratitude, delighted not that he should have made this saving excuse (for she had no fear of her mother) but that he should have made the lie so beautiful. A guard of honour. That'll show Ma. Won't she think I'm popular?

Mrs. Fogg grinned until the skin of her cheeks rolled up into diagonal ruts beneath her temples. Then she screamed at the top of her voice, "I'll teach you to go running after the soldiers!" adding conversationally, with the good-

humour of complete satisfaction, "That'll shame her." She disappeared once more into the Lamb.

"Thanks," said Eily, "you're a gentleman." She pushed back the hair from her face, drew her coat about her that the apron should not show beneath. She looked thin, white and tired, the ghost of an underfed, overstrained child.

"Look here," Menhenheott asked her kindly, "when your ma gets like that, does she ever lay hands on you? Because you could get her into trouble with the police for that."

Her face narrowed in contempt. "I lay hands on her, more like. No. All she does is to try and spoil my things, sometimes."

"What things?"

"She tore a dress. And I had a real beautiful bracelet, one my auntie gave me. You know, with links. Ma smashed that."

Toffit, who was conventional, said he expected Mrs. Fogg meant well; it was just her idea of being strict.

"Means well? She don't know what she means, ever. That's it. That's what makes the strain." Eily was too dispirited to remember her rôle of military belle. "She makes me sick. Even if she died I wouldn't cry much."

"Here, here," Toffit protested, "you can't say that. She's your ma, after all."

She looked at him as if his stupidity made her too tired to think. "Go on, talk. Talk's cheap. Well, cheero, boys. Got to cook dinner."

Menhenheott flipped up a lock of her hair, patted her cheek. "If ever she does hurt you, you let me know, will you?"

"I can take care of myself. Haven't I had to all along? Ever since my dad died, anyway. But thanks, all the same." She walked on, hitching a stocking as she went.

"Poor little brute," Menhenheott said. They returned to the conversation interrupted by Mrs. Fogg, concerning Lilley and Cassilis. "Well, I'd like to see Greasy get what's coming to him."

"Don't see how he will. Which of the lads is going to talk? And the mess don't know."

"It'll get around, especially if Lejardin tells the B.Q."

"He won't. He said he wasn't going to, because old Beau Geste would only tell Toddy Felse, and Toddy would have to make a report."

Dakin came walking quickly along the street. As he approached the door of the mess, Elvorden came out; Dakin was too preoccupied to notice him.

"Haw-Haw will have his blood for that," said Menhenheott. "Hold on a tick, Fred; I want to watch."

Elvorden's voice was high. "Dakin!"

"Yes, sir."

"If there's been some new rule since this morning that officers are not to be saluted, I'm not aware of it. Has there been?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry. I didn't see you."

"I don't think I'm invisible, am I?"

"No, sir."

"Is there anything wrong with your eyesight? If there is perhaps you'd better see the M.O."

"No, sir."

"This is the second time this has happened in four days. If it happens again there will be trouble."

"I'm sorry, sir." Dakin saluted, and went into the mess. Elvorden, his face crimson as a child's before tears, walked on.

In a moment or so Dakin emerged and crossed the road to where Toffit and Menhenheott stood. He was trembling with rage and humiliation. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes. All the same, you must have been blind as a bat not to see him. Don't let me catch you cutting salutes again, or there'll be trouble."

Dakin ignored the sergeant's rebuke. "He knows I didn't do it purposely! If it had been Cass or Strutt they'd have passed it up. I'd like to choke that swine."

"The worst of Haw-Haw," Menhenheott said slowly, "or maybe you'd call it the best of him, is that he knows his job inside out. Knows gunnery, anyhow. He's better than anyone except Toddy and the B.C."

Toffit protested, "And Strutt."

"No. Strutt's good, but he doesn't know the theory backsides and foremost like Haw-Haw does."

"Strutt's a better officer."

"Granted, because he treats the lads well and has things

tidy; but Haw-Haw's the chap who'd be brightest in a real dirty spot."

"Nice to hear all the pæans of praise," Dakin interrupted bitterly.

"The what?"

"The chorus of praise, if you like, Sarge."

"You're too educated for me," Menhenheott said, widely smiling. Then he was grave again, patting Dakin's shoulder. "Don't let him get you down. Worse things happen at sea. Wouldn't you rather be a nice cosy gunner in Christenhurst putting up with Haw-Haw's rockets than a nice, freezing Jerry outside Stalingrad? Well, then."

"That's where he ought to be, outside Stalingrad, doing the bleeding goose-step."

Menhenheott saw to his horror that two great tears had sprung up in Dakin's eyes, like double lenses brightening and distorting them. "Here," he said quickly, "I want a word with you. You go along, Fred, I'll see you later." In silence he took Dakin down a cobbled alley to the farm-house in which some of the men were billeted, and into the deserted kitchen at the back.

He looked on uneasily while the young man, dropping his head into his hands, began to cry as fluently and with as little concealment as a child who conceives himself unjustly punished.

Menhenheott said at last, "Come on, Dakin, that's enough. You've got to stop it now. You tell me what's up and I'll see if I can help. I want to help; you know that. I hate to see a chap in the state you're in, especially when he seems to be getting worse and worse all the time. What's the matter?"

Dakin, who had been leaning against a scrubbed and empty dresser, wildly swung his body round and faced the sergeant. "What's the matter? The army's the matter! This damned, filthy, useless, hopeless life, day after day wasted, and no hope of a time when it'll be over and done with, and one can get back to civilisation and to everything that makes life decent. Oh, it's all right for you! Call me a snob if you like, but I'm only stating facts. You were brought up tough, had to struggle most of your life; your friends were the sort of chaps who are your friends here. You understand one another, while I'm an outsider. I

wasn't brought up to peel spuds, and scrub out latrines, and touch my cap, and eat this muck they call food, and live like a pig. You think perhaps I was brought up soft. Well, I was. In civvy street I had a decent job, I had a decent home, I had prospects. I was an only child, and probably my mother made a fool of me. My father died, and she brought me up, and perhaps we lived in each other's pockets too much ; but was that my fault ? I'd be happier if I were like you, like Toffit, like Mangan. I'm not saying I'm proud of what I am. I'm saying that I am what I am, and that I can't help it. This life is hell to me. I wake up every morning to face another day's misery. When I go to bed at night I repeat names or numbers to myself so as not to think of the next morning. I'd rather be dead than as I am. Do you understand me ? "

Menhenheott hoisted himself on to the edge of the copper and in silence swung his legs back and forth. Taking out a packet of cigarettes he lit one for himself, threw another to Dakin who let it fall to the ground, where it rolled under the dresser. The sergeant struck a match against his hard, yellowed thumbnail, touched it to the tobacco and blew the smoke into a series of marvellous rings, each passing through its predecessor. Meanwhile, Dakin stiffened his body a little and began to pick at a tack protruding from the wall. He was trembling.

" Yes," Menhenheott said at last, " most of what you say's true. I was brought up tough. When I was a kid, me and my brothers used to go round the back-doors asking for the kitchen scraps. If we was lucky we'd get given cheese, or a bit of cold bacon. We pinched things off stalls, too, when we was hungry. I'd often win a rabbit, or a bird even, or a bit of fish. Lucky I wasn't ever caught, or I'd have gone to Borstal most likely, and I wonder where I'd be now if that had happened ? " He stared expressionlessly for a moment into a hypothetical future, then clicked his tongue against his teeth and continued, " Still, I wasn't. Yes, we was tough 'Erbs. My dad was a trade union organiser—not such a cinch in those days. He fought for recognition in several works, and won it, too ; he was a fine man, my dad. That's why I've got more to lose than you. If Hitler won the war, bang goes my old dad's work. Bang goes some of my mates into the concentration camp. Bang goes a lot of

things that make my life worth living ; so I suppose I don't feel about the war as you do. But if you think I'd enjoy living like a pig—which we don't here, and it's tripe to say we do—because I'm used to living like one, you're wrong. My mother kept our home nice, and she was proud of it, and we were too. It was always decent even in the worst times, and when times got better we lacked for nothing she could help us to. The trouble with you is, you're making the wrong excuses. You're not miserable in the army because you're better class than some of the lads ; Tawney comes from a swell family, and he's happy enough. He mucks in without any trouble, doesn't he ? And he's a good chap, too. No. You're not miserable because we live like pigs, because we don't, and you know it. The billets are decent, the food's decent enough, and the life's a healthy one. You'd be miserable in Heaven, Dakin, because you're a muck of nerves. Think everybody hates you. If anyone ticks you off for anything, you're insulted. Yes, you are an outsider ; because you make yourself one. You stay outside having your little moans till people get fed up with you. *You* want to go back to civvy street ! *You* had a decent home ! *You* had prospects ! I'm not a regular ; I'd never make the army my life. I want my home as much as you want yours. I was in the printing trade ; I had a good job, too. And believe me, the world could get on easier without insurance clerks than it could without printers.

" Look here, I've been sorry for you. I've held Felse off time and time again when he wanted to skin you alive. And what's more, I've seen Strutt save you from *me*, which just shows you that everyone's not against you, as you seem to think. But this can't go on. If I was the War Office, I'd have you out of the army in a brace of shakes, but I'm not, and you've got to make the best of it. If you started taking an interest in your job you'd like it more. You'd get away from the spuds. Why don't you put your guts into it ? You ought to do all right. You've got twice, three times my education. I left school at thirteen and went to work. I didn't get no time afterwards for study. Strutt went through the ranks, so did Lilley and Cassilis. Even Elvorden, for a bit They all got on. What's stopping you ? If you're too big for the ranks, then work to get out of them. At any rate, work. You say you're sick of *the* life. You might just

say you were sick of life and do yourself in, because life's the army now, if you get me. We can't get out of it, so we've got to make the best do we can. Besides, I want to win the bloody war, not just stand and watch it ! . . ."

He drew breath, said, in a gentler tone, " Come on, have a blitz on yourself. You're a good enough chap when you like to be. You don't want to let people like Elvorden upset you. We all know what he's like and take him with a pinch of salt. Point is, how's he going to be in action ? That's what counts. Course, the trouble is that there isn't no action. Bad for men, always hanging about. Still, we don't know what's in the wind, and when we get going you'll see a change. So cheer up. Feel better ? "

Dakin swallowed. He said stonily, " Thank you, Sergeant. I'll remember what you say." His eyes were red-rimmed but steady. He looked at Menhenheott, drummed his fingers on the top of the dresser.

" All right," Menhenheott said hopelessly, " that's all. I've finished. Cut along."

Elvorden, returning to the mess for lunch, saw Dakin coming towards him, and taking a decision that had been troubling him greatly, stopped and spoke.

" About this morning. I know that you failed to salute because you didn't see me, and I now realise that I said more to you than I meant." He was furious at his own mounting colour. Yet I am doing what is right. There must be no shadow of injustice. Dakin waited, half-smiling. Elvorden resolutely ignored that smile. He added, " I'm sorry. Please be more alert in future, and I'm sure there'll be no need for this sort of thing to happen again."

Dakin still smiled. He saluted with great precision and went across the street to the NAAFI.

Elvorden, inwardly disturbed by the effort of this settlement which had seemed to him so repugnant and yet so necessary, strode up the steps into the mess and walked straight into the ante-room, where he found Lilley, Toller and Glaiden reading the Sunday papers.

Lilley looked up. " Hullo, Saint Ives."

" Hullo, Lilley."

" B.C. told you the glad news yet ? "

" What news ? " Elvorden's heart moved.

"About taking my lads over."

"Oh, that. No."

"He will. I wish you joy of them; they're the scurviest lot in the battery. Paget's an old sweat who swings the lead till he drives you mad, and one of them, I haven't found out whom yet, nicks any money he finds lying about. And Purkiss drinks like a fish. Good hunting." Lilley, apart from a certain tightness in the skin about his eyes, showed no sign of strain or apprehension. "I'd better fix up with you to take over stores. First thing to-morrow will do, won't it?"

Elvorden made no reply. Lilley raised his eyebrows and shrugged. He drew Glaiden's attention to a leading article, answered successfully Toller's request for four words, four, two, three and six letters respectively, expressing 'a catty sort of game.' He was, to all appearances, quite at ease.

Cassilis came in, saw Lilley and for a scarcely perceptible moment, stopped short. Then he walked up to the table, nodded to the four men and switched a newspaper from the pile.

Elvorden knew the acceleration of his own pulse, the mounting fumes of fear. Shutting his mind to all thought of consequence, he forced the words out, knowing that they would start a train of events beyond his powers of checking. "Lilley. Cassilis. I want to speak to you a moment. Will you both come up to my room?"

Glaiden said helplessly, "Elvorden!" and Toller stared.

Lilley's face was suffused with blood, the little, pointed ends of his moustache glittering against it like lances upon a sunset. "What for? Why the devil should we freeze up there?"

Cassilis said slowly, "Come on, Lilley, indulge him."

Glaiden made a move of intervention.

"This is private business," Elvorden said, gasping a little.

Glaiden opened his lips, shut them again. Shrugging, he sat down.

Elvorden, Lilley and Cassilis climbed the stairs to the top floor and went into Elvorden's room, which was tiny, neat and very cold.

"Now what?" Lilley asked.

Cassilis examined the volumes in the small bedside shelf,

turning the pages from the top right-hand corners in the respectful fashion of one who loves books. "*Plain Tales from the Hills*. Brilliant stories, but brutish, don't you think? Some of them are so savage they make you dizzy."

Elvorden said, with stiff and ridiculous courtesy, "Won't you both sit down?"

"Damn, I'm not going to be here long enough to sit," Lilley blustered. "I want to get back to the fire. What's on your mind?"

"That incident last night, between you and Cassilis, was seen. I saw it. So did several of the men who were having a breather outside the hall."

No one answered him.

He continued, speaking rapidly, "You wouldn't have seen them. You know where that tarpaulin's hanging loose from the roof of the hall annexe? They were using that as an umbrella. I thought you should know."

Lilley said quietly, looking at neither man, "Who in the mess knows?"

"Glaiden came out just after it had happened and asked me what the excitement was about, so I told him. That's all."

"Thank God for that. Look here, Cass, I ——"

Elvorden went to the window and looked out. He said, not turning his head, "I don't think you understand. It's my duty to report this. I wanted to let you know first, that's all."

He heard a slight movement behind him, heard Cassilis say sharply, "Lilley!"

Elvorden swung round. "I don't want to do this! I was awake half the night, worrying which was the right course to take. I like you, Bert, and we've always got on well; but this is something bigger. It's a question of discipline, of the whole life of the Battery. The men saw, do you understand that? If they start to talk ——"

"You little Cert. B.-pup," Lilley cut in, beside himself with rage, "you dirty little tinpot snob, I'll see you in hell before ——"

Cassilis set the book aside, rose from the bed and said, in a voice so smooth, so unnaturally gentle that it seemed to suspend the very currents of air in the room, "Now don't pull the poor chap's leg, Bert; it's not kind. Tell him the

truth, or I will." He paused, and when he resumed speaking, chose his words with the care of a teacher making some explanation to a subnormal child. "Lilley and I were having a perfectly friendly chat about matters that don't concern you. I was ragging him, and he made a pass at my chin—as one does, fooling about. He didn't even touch me, though I staggered as though he had. We'd had a drink or two, and it seemed funny at the time. I cut my chin exactly as I told the chaps at breakfast ; fell over my feet and busted it against the bridge. So you see there's nothing for you to worry about, is there?" He smiled blandly. Lilley sat down. The colour had drained from his face, and he was sickly with fear and bewilderment.

Elvorden said, "You don't expect me to believe that?"

"No," Cassilis replied, "I don't." His smile faded. "But that's our story. You can't go to the B.C. about a little horseplay, can you?"

The boy shook himself violently, smacked his hand against his side. He said, "And you can't substantiate that cock-and-bull story. Do you suppose the men don't know the difference between a serious blow and a bit of fooling?"

"Anyone can make a mistake. You're a very new subaltern, Elvorden, and you've got a career ahead of you. Surely you wouldn't want to spoil it by a bit of silliness? And I really don't suppose anyone would admire you for it."

"You think I don't know that? Cassilis, you've got sense. You know perfectly well what an officer's duty is in a case like this."

"A case like what? Two lads playing sillyfools? I know we weren't very dignified."

"I shall have to do what's right."

"You'll have to? Why not Glaiden?"

Elvorden said obstinately, "He wasn't a witness. I was. You've got the chance to report this yourself, Cassilis. Or better still, Lilley, you should do it. It would count in your favour."

Lilley said quickly, "You'd get me chucked out, would you? Have you any idea what that means to a man's family, to his prospects after the war?"

Cassilis looked tired and exasperated. "Don't be silly,

Elvorden. How can Lilley go to the B.C. and say, 'Please, sir, Cassilis and I were having a bit of fun in the street after the dance, and I pretended to play pit-a-pat, and he pretended to fall, and we both had a good laugh and danced off into the wings?'"

The boy's eyes were shocked and brilliant. He replied, "I shan't make any move to-night," and left the room abruptly.

Lilley said, "Nice of you, Cassilis; thanks. But he won't swallow it."

"It's stuck him for the moment, though. By the way, I don't want you thinking I've any sympathy for you, personally. It was a swinish trick you got Gillie to play on Strutt. A guttersnipe trick, with his wife there."

"Well, nobody got hurt, did they?"

"Only you," said Cassilis, rather queerly. "When Gillie told me she'd got a joke in hand I warned her to be careful in case it turned out tragic for someone. I wonder how it's going to turn out for you?"

Lilley began to walk up and down the room, kicking at Elvorden's bed each time he passed the foot. He said distractedly, "Why didn't you tell him the truth? Why the hell didn't you?"

"I have some imagination," Cassilis answered, once more picking up *Plain Tales from the Hills* and glancing through the pages. "I daresay your wife would be pretty upset to see you kicked out."

"Oh God, yes. Oh God, yes." Lilley stopped to peer into a mirror, as if afraid that worry had left some violent mark upon his face.

"Kipling had a story in another book," said Cassilis, "rather a repulsive story, about two subalterns assaulting a third, who subsequently announced his intention of reporting them; so to save themselves they seduced him into assaulting them. I suppose there's no hope of provoking Elvorden. No. The circumstances aren't the same." He pressed the book back into the shelf. "Well, I'm going down. Trust in God."

"I wouldn't trust Him farther than I could see Him," Lilley muttered. "I say, Cass."

"What?"

"Decent of you."

"No. It's simply that I don't want to see a general row. You're not worth it."

Cassilis went downstairs into the ante-room, where he sat quietly reading the newspapers.

Pickering and Charmian walked in Grayling Wood. He said to her suddenly, after a silence, "You're taking it all very well, you know. Excellently well."

Her eyes filled. "What else is there to do?"

"You could have the vapours," said Pickering.

"There'd be no use in that. Don't let's talk about it."

"Why not? You'll feel better if you do. We both know about it, and it's so much easier not to pretend that you're perfectly well and perfectly happy."

"I am well."

"People aren't well when they're miserable. I never was."

She smiled at him then, putting her hand on his sleeve. "You're happy now?"

He nodded. "Yes, I think I am. But we won't change the subject. Was Roy pretty brusque?"

"No," she said forlornly, "not that. He wrote four pages. He said he'd been unable to help falling in love with her; but that it had only brought wretchedness up till now because he so hated to hurt me. He said he'd been a cad. He wanted to marry her, but wouldn't say anything till he'd heard from me. If I wanted him to wait, he'd do so. If I thought he'd been unfair he'd tell the other girl all about me, even tell her he wasn't free—to—" In a moment or so she recovered herself. "You see, Claud, she and her mother entertained him such a lot. They were so kind when he was first in the army, giving him tea and letting him have baths and asking him to meet their friends . . . And of course they're not to blame for what happened, because I don't suppose they knew anything about me."

Pickering repressed a shoot of anger. They should have known about her, if MacGregor had been honest. "You're being so good about this that I feel slightly uneasy."

Charmian muttered, hanging her head, "Do you suppose I don't lie awake at night thinking of all the horrible things I'd like to do to her? But it's so illogical. She's probably quite nice and quite innocent."

He said, "This is such a usual tragedy of war, Charm. Not that the thought makes it any easier for you. Have you answered him?"

"I answered him at once. I said he was quite free and wasn't to be unhappy about me. That I'd always liked him—apart from loving him, I mean. Nothing could alter that."

Her brother, in the wisdom of his years, sighed a little and made no comment. He knew how, as time went on, the aching love she had for the boy would turn to indifference, and that in future time this indifference would turn to a faint, scarcely-realised dislike. The humiliations of adolescence are remembered into age.

They had come to the top of the hill. Clearing a way through the abundant, fleshy greenery, he brought her into the open and they stood halfway up the sky, wondering at the weald stretched below them in the blue luxuriance to the limits of sight. Cloud shadows swept the open fields, deepened the purple valley-shadows, for a moment sucked the light from the spires that rose all over the land like pins on a map. A train running on a distant track threw out a plume of smoke so marvellously white that it gathered all the sun to itself, thereby emphasising, as though it were a new discovery, the auxiliary character of every other colour to its own completeness.

"A reward for your goodness," Pickering said slowly, putting his arm about her shoulders. She was nearly as tall as he, and her slenderness was, as his, inherited from the father of them both. Her hair, uncovered, seemed not to take the light but to be a refuge from it, forever a repose and a sleep. Her profile was delicate upon the sky, a line of silverpoint.

She looked down upon the shining world as if she were drawing new strength from it, with her gaze following the trail of smoke till it was lost in a sudden folding of the hills. "What lovely things there are in England to paint," she said, inducing him to speak of the thing that most interested him.

"And they get painted; and what's the result? Fake French, or the draw-a-line-around-it-beer-is-best school." He laughed. "What a lot of tripe goes unscathed since I joined the army."

" Do you still know as much as you always thought you did ? " she teased him.

" Much more. My taste's richer by two and a half years' irrelevant experience." He took his arm from her neck, nodded towards the path a little way below, where a young soldier walked alone. " There's your friend Tawney."

" Is that his name ? ' '

" I saw you getting on nicely together last night."

" I suppose I really shouldn't have asked him to dance."

They looked at each other and laughed. " Can you imagine me caring a twopenny dam ? " said Pickering. " Come on, let's scandalise Helena still further by joining him."

" Mother ? Why ? "

" Your mother's a terrible snob these days."

" Oh, she *isn't*," Charmain protested, all smiles, " but she has to live with Dan."

They clambered hand in hand down the slope, slipping and sliding on the mushed, sweet-smelling leaves, and gained the path a little ahead of Tawney, who stood aside to let them pass.

" Hallo, Tawney," Pickering said, " wonderful day, isn't it ? "

" It certainly is, sir."

" You and my sister met last night."

" We did, sir. Did you enjoy the dance, Miss Pickering ? "

She replied briefly, flushing a little.

Pickering said, " We were talking about painting, wondering whether Kent's had a fair deal. You any views on the subject ? "

Tawney hesitated for a moment. " Well, I don't know a lot about pictures. But Kent's a funny county, isn't it ? A sort of natural greed about it, as if all the plants were scrambling over one another and swallowing one another up. Sub-tropical, almost ; there's nothing else in England like it. I'm afraid I haven't kept up with modern painting, but my uncle's got a collection by that French customs officer chap."

" Rousseau."

" Yes. He might have liked this, I always think. Lots of everything, you know."

The Brittonmouth uncle ? Pickering thought, surprised, I know who that is. " I'd dearly like to see his pictures."

"Well, any time you were that way, sir, he'd be only too pleased to show them to you. I'm sure he would."

"I'll take you up on that some day." He added, "We're walking as far as Blackstock Farm and then turning back. You going our way?"

"Yes, sir. Then I'm going to Hallingford. They show films there on Sundays in the church hall. Very old films, but it makes a break."

The three went together along the path, along the rim of the weald.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUNDAY: AFTER BLACKOUT

"DEAR MRS. COMFORT,

"There is a boy in this town who I like very much but who treats me as if he hates me. He will go out of his way to tease and say hurting things, so much so that the other girls notice and call us the Deadly Enemies. This is awful for me as I've never done anything to hurt him that I know of and I want him to like me more than anything in the world. What can I do to make him change?"

Eily squatted on the floor beside the oil-stove, the magazine spread across her lap. As she read she raised her hand repeatedly to knock a dangling strand of hair away from her eyes, and her tongue was busy as a shuttle to and fro across her lower lip.

"You have often heard, my dear, the saying that hate is akin to love. This may have seemed silly to you, and yet, would this boy single you out for his attentions, however unwelcome they may seem, if you had not some peculiar attraction for him? If he were not interested in you, he would treat you with indifference. Can it be that he is too shy to make his real feelings, his warm feelings, apparent? Try taking his banter in good part, returning his jokes with interest, if you are wittily inclined; and if he still persists in his course, try avoiding those places where you are likely

to meet him. Good luck, dear, and remember that queer, but O, so true, little saying!"

Eily allowed the magazine to slide from her knees, and leaning back against the table leg, clasped her hands about her ankles. Had she an enemy in the Battery? Vic? Well, no, not that. He was always kind, but always indifferent—as Mrs. Comfort put it. Her heart warmed with gratitude to the elderly woman sitting at a desk a hundred miles away, writing letters to strangers in trouble. What goodness, this, to give all your life to helping people you didn't know! Of course, she wasn't always too modern; it could hardly be expected. To letters beginning, "My friend and I are only fifteen, but——" she would usually reply, "My dears, don't spoil your youth by thinking seriously of boys yet awhile." No, you couldn't expect anything else. The drawing of her showed how un-modern she was, and yet how wise and sweet. Chris? No. He doesn't hate me. Wish he did. She shut him out of her mind before he could switch a darkness into it.

Not Tawney, not Chris. Mangan is rudest to me. Mangan? Mangan? Eily picked up *Girl's Garland*, straightened out the pages and referred once more to the first of the two letters. "He will go out of his way to tease me and say hurting things." Well, doesn't he? He crossed the road, Friday morning, on purpose to say something rude about my high heels.

Her face was filled with light. Suppose, all this time, he'd been in love with me only not liked to show it in case the others made fun of him? But of course, he's pretty old. Older than most of them. Well, and what about that film where the musician fell in love with the schoolgirl and they ran away together after the concert? It does happen, then. There wouldn't be a film about it if it didn't. And there was that book Auntie had: *Anne, A Child Wife*. Eily sighed so deeply that the pages flickered upwards in the small draught. Autie says I couldn't be married for a time; but suppose . . . if . . . Her thoughts, clogging, refused to shape the form of words. Well, supposing: wouldn't it be different then? Wouldn't it be different? Wouldn't they let me?

She shivered, and in that moment of weakness the picture sprang into her mind, small and perfect as the negative cut from a roll of colour-film: a little wood full of moonlight,

the leaf shadows sharp on the fallen leaves in the clearing, and across his sleeping face the shadow of a great slanting tree.

Eily said aloud, "No!" and she sprang to her feet. She stood for a moment or so motionless, like a runner at a cross-roads, uncertain which way to follow. Then she walked to the mirror and peered at her face. She said determinedly, "Maybe Mangan acts as he does because he likes me. I'm going to think about that, and not be silly any longer. I won't start being silly, won't start worrying till to-morrow. There's still time; I can still wait.

Taking out her lipstick, she drew a big mouth upon her small one and with a stub of lead pencil lengthened the corners of her eyes. She went into the scullery, where she damped a comb and contrived a row of curls across her fore-head. The rest of her hair she pulled back behind her ears, pinning a red silk net over it. Time? Four minutes to seven. By the time I get out Ma will be in the Lamb, so I shan't run into her on my way. I will go as far as the pillar-box and back. A charming vision took her. Suppose I met Mangan, and he broke down and said he did like me after all? Phyllis and Coralie and May sometimes go into the private bar at the Lamb. Perhaps he would even take me. Ma wouldn't know, not in the Public. If not to-night, some other night.

She ran upstairs, took out the bright bowl and kissed it. "You just bring me luck," she urged, "you bring me luck. You sometimes do, don't you?"

All Saints' clock struck the hour. Eily put on her coat and went out into the street, where the houses threw shapes of violet and indigo across the white pavements. It was bitterly cold. Sidney Mangan raced along from billets, slapping his gloved hands together, and as he passed Eily gave her also a cheerful slap. "Hullo, Titch, why aren't you in church?" He ran by, turning once to shout, over his shoulder, "Or gone bye-byes?"

At first she thought of following him, but changed her mind. He did seek me out. He hadn't got to touch me, had he, or to speak? How do I know he isn't keen? She suppressed the fragment of good sense that ridiculed her other thoughts. I'm not to know, am I?

A group of soldiers went by without a word for her, and in a while she saw Dakin walking alone on the opposite pave-

ment, in the direction of the billets. Immediately, instinctively, she shrank into the dark of an alley. She could not talk to him again. Would not think of him again, not ever, if she could help it. Not after the wood, and the moon, and the slant of the great tree.

The Lamb was crowded, the end of the room near the windows warmed only by the heat of men's bodies, for at the far end the fire was blocked away by the soldiers standing before it. Phyllis and May, peeping in from the private bar, were told to go away again. Men only in the saloon, talking men's matters, telling men's jokes.

"Make room for me," said Sidney Mangan, thrusting himself towards his friend Mrs. Mills, the proprietress. "Maggie, something to keep out the cold. Expense no object. What do you think?"

"Try a rum and milk?"

"Not bad, not bad. Hallo, Sarge! What are you having? Same as me?"

"Already got some, thanks."

"Well, soak it up. Maggie, two rum and milks. Cripes, it's cold all of a sudden! Poor old Eily's out there, too, trying to make a catch. I'm sorry for that kid, I am. No dad, and a drunken old lunatic of a ma who'd rather die than scrub a floor or get a meal."

"I'm about sick of Eily," said Scott, over his shoulder, "I think she ought to be put in an institution."

Alf Conway, sitting on the privileged chair at the side of the bar, jovial and yet withdrawn, emerged for a moment from his private world to observe that she did serve as a kind of mascot. "Some regiments only have goats."

Toffit said, "Well, Sid, and what do you think's going to happen to Greasy?"

Someone kicked his ankle, and he grunted in pained surprise. Mangan drove an elbow into his ribs.

"All right, all right," said Conway, "I know all about it. Who doesn't?" Smiling benevolently, he opened a newspaper and at once raised it before his face in token of retirement.

Mangan made a vibrant noise with his lips. "Christ knows. I'm sick of the subject. Haven't we had it off and on all day?"

"Any bit of excitement's welcome," said Lejardin, "and this is a cracking great bit. What a silly basket he was! He's sure to get bounced for it."

Menhenheott accepted his rum and milk, nodded thanks to Mangan. "Is he? I'm not so sure. Suppose it doesn't get to the B.C.?"

"It will," Toffit assured him, "silly to think it won't. Isn't the whole Battery jawing it to death already?"

"They don't always know what we jaw about." The five men had moved away from the quartermaster and joined the group on the hearthrug. "I still think it might be hushed up."

"Oh, don't talk silly, Sarge," Mangan protested. "Anyway, who minds losing Greasy? No one's going to present him with a set of fish-knives when he goes."

"And Cassilis is all right," said Lejardin, "I like him. I like him about the best of the lot."

"I say, did you see Strutty's wife?" Scott asked, "Smashin' girl. Did you see Gillie Eagles going after Strutt just to make her wild? I'm sure that was why. He was looking like thunder dancing with her—with Gillie, I mean. You never saw such a face in your life. I can see things, up at the piano. Lots of things."

"What about poor old Tod when Ida blew in?" Mangan roared, in a sudden joy of memory, "Now his face *was* a treat!" He glanced round belatedly, to make quite sure Felse was not there. "Not that I'd waste any pity on him. He's a sneaky toad, all round you one minute and planning how to do you dirt the next."

"You'd have been sorry for him if you'd seen him this afternoon," interrupted a boy of twenty or so, who had left one conversation to join in the other. He was a pleasant lad, plump and black-haired; before the war he had been messenger for the London branch of an American bank and had run all day about the city in tall hat and swallow-tail coat, a satchelled Mercury. "Mrs. F. took him for a walk up and down the street, sticking close as a policeman, and she wouldn't let him go till May had come along and seen them."

"You see all the sights, don't you, Cray?" Mangan admired. "And it was you that saw last night's do."

"And me," Lejardin interposed indignantly, "I was there, too."

Cray said, " Cor, it was something ! There they both were, in that passage just between Piggot's, the draper's, and Ma Porter's cottage. We couldn't see them very well at first because the moon was in——"

" We weren't interested in them then," Lejardin interjected.

" No, of course we weren't ; but we could hear them jawing, and it struck me that it sounded a bit as if they were having a row."

" Struck you half an hour afterwards," Mangan jeered.

" No, honest, it did ; didn't it seem like that to you, Jardy ? "

" Well, I'm not sure now. May have done."

" Anyway, the moon came out again. There they were, just like in a play, glaring at each other, and Cassilis said something, and then Greasy shot up his fist quick as lightning and socked him one. Oh, it was a beast ! You could hear the smack."

" And then "—Lejardin took up the tale—" Cass shouted something like, ' For Christ's sake——' "

" No, he didn't. He said, ' You're a swine.' "

" Didn't sound like that to me."

McInnes, a broad red Scotsman, called authoritatively across the room. " He said, ' You out of your mind ? ' I heard him clearly. That's what he said."

" Might have been," Lejardin admitted. " Sounds more like him, doesn't it, Cray ? "

" Better make up your minds," Menhenheott warned them, " because you'll be giving evidence at the court martial. If any." His voice fell, by chance, into a silence ; the room heard him, and the silence was prolonged for a few moments longer.

" Poor old Greasy," said someone.

" Poor ? " Mangan was outraged. " No sense of proper behaviour, you haven't. What's going to happen to the bloody army if officers can whizz round punching each other all over the street ? Besides, Greasy's no good any old how. I've heard him say things they ought to lock him up for. Bet you before the war he went round chucking stones through windows in the East End and Heiling like Hell. I know his type. I've seen him before. What was he in civvy street ? "

"Motor salesman," Menhenheott replied, "That's what he knows about best. He's the best M.T. man we've got."

Scott sat down at Mrs. Mill's marmalade-coloured piano and began to play. The talking died down a little. "Let's have some classical," someone said. Scott crashed with such darling gusto into the Second Hungarian Rhapsody that the shaded candlesticks above the keyboard jiggled and rocked, sending down a shower of small gold beads to skip across the yellowed ivory. Menhenheott, himself a jealous performer who disliked the exhibitions of rival instrumentalists, endured the piece until Scott reached the fanciful section, skipping one hand over the other with a confidence maddeningly gay; and then, taking his glass, he went into the private bar where Phyllis and May sat alone, reading old copies of women's magazines.

"Honoured indeed," said Phyllis, raising her glass of gin and lime-juice. "Well, any news? Mr. Lilley got the push yet?"

He sat down. "How the deuce do you girls know?"

"The gipsy told us," May retorted. "Oh, don't be silly. Isn't every one talking?"

He replied slowly, "Yes, I suppose they must be. I suppose they must."

Philip and Stacey Strutt sat holding hands in the back seats of the bus.

"Chris'nu'st, the Lamb," the conductor shouted up at them.

She sighed. "Here already! And I was so enjoying it."

They climbed down into the roadway and for a few moments stood leaning over the bridge, watching the water as it flowed, silver and swift as mercury, through the massy shadows created by the moon. Stacey thought, this is one of the rare moments, one of those that for no reason I shall remember. When I go home I will write to Philip, "Do you remember how we leaned over Christenhurst bridge looking at the water and how, when you dropped your cigarette, it fell on to a leaf and went whirling along into the dark, a little red lamp insistent upon a way to nowhere?" Only I shall put it differently, in case he should think me pretentious or sentimental: "Do you remember how we hung over the stream on that freezing night, watching your fag-end

that wouldn't drown ? " But he would remember it not in the words of her pen, but in the words of her thought.

" Cold ? " he asked her.

She shook he head.

" You were shivering."

" Just thinking how long it would be before I saw you again."

" Not really so long. I'm due for leave in seven weeks, or thereabouts. Besides, you'll come down again."

" Will you be home when I have the baby ? "

" I'll get compassionate leave, yes—Oh, sorry ! " He apologised to somebody passing, who had stumbled against his foot.

" Will you be scared ? "

" I don't think so. You're an efficient girl, and you're very healthy. Why shouldn't you be all right ? " He added anxiously, " Darling, don't count too much on this. You may be mistaken."

" No. I'm not. Let's go somewhere and have a drink."

" Fleece ? "

" No, the other one. The Lamb. I liked it. Why two sheep-names in one village ? "

" Lord knows. I believe the locals could tell you. I've some dim idea that it was the outcome of an old quarrel between rival publicans, but I'm not sure."

" I suppose the B.C. won't send a message to say you can stay with me to-night ? "

" Afraid not. He's been pretty good, as it is."

" Yes, I know. But you'll stay with me late ? "

" I needn't get in till midnight or thereabouts." He snapped his fingers. " Oh, hell take it ! "

" What's the matter ? "

" I promised Glaiden I'd have a word with Elvorden, but it's too late now. For all I know, the balloon's already gone up."

They went across the road to the Lamb, and meeting Menhenheott and the two girls in the private bar, held careful conversation with them. No one mentioned motor transport, jaws, dances, court-martials, nor any form of violence whatsoever.

Eily Fogg ran along the white road, in her mind repeating

again and again the words Stacey Strutt had spoken to her husband. Will you be home when I have the baby? Will you be home when I have the baby? Will you be home, be home, be home. The baby, the baby, the baby.

No!

It can't, it mustn't be. It would be so terrible, and I meant no harm. Only to comfort him because he was miserable and cried; because he cried, see? Men don't, as a rule, so it is terrible for them when they have to.

The night was dreadful, the moon baring the fear in the trees and the hills and the stones, the fear and the condemnation. No hope of believing that this was a dream, for no dream-shapes could be so sharp as these. The shadows upon the hills were giants encircling the terror and shutting it in. In dreams no moon shines; or if there is a moon, it is one that casts no shadows. In dreams there are roads of escape, though you cannot always, with your feet bogged in mud and the wings beating about your face, gain their warm entrances; but here is the reality of no escape at all. These roads I know, and none of them leads to the morning.

Above these panicked thoughts, so much beyond her expression the thought of the words ran wildly over and over, each overwhelming and devouring the other. She tried, by remembering other words, to force them out; I've got spurs that jingle jangle jingle; but the jingling grew so loud, the jangling so discordant that she was afraid the whole village would hear the noise that was inside her own head, and she was forced to stop, panting, in a freezing sweat, to assure herself that this could not possibly be so.

She saw Mangan in her path, Mangan leaving the Lamb.

"What, Titch, you still out?"

The evening's early fantasy rushed into the confusion of her mind, for the moment dominating it utterly. "Let me walk along with you. I want to talk to you."

"Now look, Titch," he said kindly, "you run along to bed, and stop bothering. No one's going out with a kid like you, and you'll only get yourself a packet of trouble one of these days if you go on the way you're doing."

She said urgently, "You like me, don't you? I know you do. Otherwise you wouldn't always be at me. If you do like me, and you tell me so, I swear I won't tell the others. It'll be a secret between us, honest. Love's akin to hate."

Taking her chin between his fingers, he peered curiously into her distraught face. "What the hell are you talking about, Pigsnitch? You gone barmy?"

"I wouldn't tell, I wouldn't." The tears ran down her face.

He was embarrassed and baffled. "Here, here, you go home and get a good night's sleep. I can't hang around with you all night, anyway. Besides, there's people coming. Go on, dry your face, and scram off. Uncle Sid likes you all right, but he thinks little girls should be seen and not heard, get me? Go on. Hop it." He saw, from the corner of his eye, three soldiers approaching from the bridge, and he added frantically, "It's about time things was put in the picture for you. You're only a silly little bit, Eily, and you're no beauty. All you'll do, hanging around the lads, is get yourself into trouble. You're just a joke here, see?—but all the lads ain't so nice as me, and if ever you do find one who doesn't see the joke you'll be damn' sorry for it after. You be a good kid, wipe that muck off your face and behave yourself till you grow up, and then maybe you'll find yourself a nice old pot and pan, and have a baby, and forget what a silly Titch you used to be. Let go my tunic, jillo! That's right. Think it over. Good-night."

Pushing her aside, he hurried away down the street, as he went boldly singing:

> "I've got spurs that jingle, jangle, jingle,
> As I go riding merrily along."

Eily, trembling with shock, with dread and humiliation so sickening that she could scarcely see the road before her, ran home. Going straight to the bedroom, she pulled out the glass bowl and then, just as she was, the make-up still upon her face, her feet still stuffed into the high, tight shoes, lay down upon the bed, hugging her treasure and crying as if she would die.

Ten o'clock.

The soldiers drained out of the Lamb, singing sadly, deliciously of the future:

> "I can see the lights of home
> Shining brightly o'er the foam."

Ron Menhenheott, out of some obscure impulse to hurt Phyllis Ricks, ducked his head and kissed May Budgen's pink and resilient cheek. Phyllis made no comment. The two girls entwined their arms and, moonlit flowers arrogant in their youth and their sap and their sweetness of blossom, they drew away from the men and walked alone, whispering secrets.

Victor Tawney, returning from Hallingford, glanced towards the Fleece as he went by, but did not slacken his steps.

The Battery Captain and his sister, alighting from the last bus, exclaimed at the blazing, cold glory of the moon. Charmian said, "I really do feel better now. I really do. You were right to make me come."

Gillie Eagles, when she had waved good-night to the last customer, leaned across the bar and said with unspeakable weariness to her husband, who was gathering up glasses from the tables, the window-ledges, the mantelshelf, the fender, "Well, did I take my whack to-night, or is your honour still sulking?"

Sam said, "You do as you please. I can manage on my own, come to that."

"You were sulking last night because I was late at the dance."

Sam turned his slow gaze upon her. His eyes, grey and lightless, had something of the opacity that marks incipient cataract. He made no reply.

"If you'd only *rave* sometimes," she said, quietly and with intensity. For a moment she was shaken by a spasm of defeat, the ripple running from her wiry head down her shoulders to her narrow hips.

"Let Toller do the raving," Sam suggested, without heat. "He'd got the sulks to-night, hadn't he? Why? Does he think you've given him the go-by for Elvorden?"

She said passionately, "Is that what you're suggesting? That I'm after that kid? I was making a fuss of him because he looked like hell; that's why. Isn't that the publican's job, to cheer people who look like hell? He's a baby. He hasn't been weaned long. Why the devil should I run after him, of all people?"

"I don't know," said Sam. "I don't know anything, and I don't care, either." He shut the doors across the dartboard,

picked up a forgotten glove and threw it on to a shelf beneath the counter. He added abruptly, " Let's have Mike back."

" Michael's staying where he is. How selfish you can be, Sam ! Do you think it's any life for a kid here ? "

" Point is, would it be any life for you if he was here."

" Oh, shut up ! " she cried in a fury, " I'm sick of your hints."

" I know I want Mike home. That's all I know."

" And I say he's not coming. He's quite all right with Louisa, and quite happy."

He looked at her, straightened his huge body and slowly raising his hand, passed it across his eyes as if to test his vision Then he relaxed, became shapeless, and began piling the ashtrays one upon the other, as carefully as a charwoman.

" I'm going to bed," said Gillie

" Good-night "

" I don't suppose you're coming till the small hours, are you ? "

" I shan't wake you," said Sam.

Eleven o'clock.

Philip Strutt, realising that his wife must rise very early and chill next morning, smoothed the bedclothes about her, touched her pretty black hair and kissed her lips. " Have a good sleep, darling, and dream lovely things all about me. I'll come round to-morrow to see you off."

" I feel a beast letting you go so early," she smiled drowsily, thinking how pleasant it would be, when he had gone, to be in the warm darkness that yet smelled of his body's sweetness, and contemplate her love for him. Her lids were falling, her words were slightly and pleasingly blurred. She held out her arms to him.

" Good-night, my pretty old pet," he said, " good-night, darling."

" Turn out the light," Stacey murmured, half-in, half-out of a dream.

He left her and went into the sharp and shining night.

As he went into the officers' quarters he saw Elvorden mounting the first flight of stairs. " I say ! I want a word with you."

The boy turned. He looked desperately tired, numbed by a sort of defiant misery. " Hullo, Strutt."

"Look here, it's about Lilley and Cass. I know all about it now. I just want to discuss it a bit with you before you do anything."

Elvorden came downstairs, stood in the feeble light of the blue-painted lamps. He said, "You needn't worry. It's all over. The B.C. knows."

"He knows! Did you——"

"No, I didn't. False did. He came in about half-past nine and saw Sadness. Lilley's under close arrest."

Strutt started to speak; yet before he could do so Elvorden cried, "But if he hadn't, I would have told! Don't you go thinking I wouldn't! You needn't take a better view of me because False got in first, because I meant to report it. It was the right thing to do."

Strutt felt suddenly cold and tired. "O.K. Maybe you're not far wrong. We won't dispute it now. Have you seen Lilley?"

"No."

"Where's Cass?"

"Upstairs. Came in half an hour ago."

"Oh. Thanks. I'll have a talk with him." He added, "Maybe you're right. Anyhow, the sweat's over and the decision's taken, so for God's sake relax a bit."

Elvorden said, trembling, "Over? For that poor devil Lilley? It's only beginning."

Strutt shrugged and went towards the stairs. "Have it your own way. Yes, that's so. Well, I'm all in; good-night."

He went upstairs where he found Cassilis sitting up in bed, waiting for him. The latter laid down his book, first putting in a matchstick to mark the page, and said, "Well? Heard about it?"

"Yes. But I knew this morning what had happened. Glaiden told me." Strutt began to undress. "I'm so tired I think I'll go to bed in my dirt. Feeling grim about it all?"

"Feeling like hell," said Cassilis. "Not that I've any brief for Lilley; you know that."

"What happened?"

"When? To-night? Oh, the bolt fell from the blue. Sadness had Lilley and me in, and probed out the story. I tried for a bit to pretend the witnesses were mistaken—that Lilley and I had been having a bit of horseplay—but of course it didn't wash with Sadness or Blanco for five minutes.

I forgot to tell you Blanco was there. I must admit that Lilley behaved pretty well, though he looked like death. I thought once or twice that he was going to cry. He threw the joke story overboard before I did, told Sadness he admitted the incident, and was sorry, and was prepared to face the music. One thing he wouldn't say, though, was what the row was about. I suppose it will have to come out in the end."

"And what was it about?" Strutt folded his trousers over a chair, hung up his tunic.

Cassilis hesitated. Then he said, "I don't imagine there's any point in keeping it back. It was more or less about you."

"Me? Good God, why?"

"Well . . . as a matter of fact, I found out that Lilley, for some reason unknown, had bribed Gillie Eagles with a handsome bottle of scent to have a little fun with you at the dance, make a dead set at you. She was quite greedy and cheerful and unmalicious about it. I saw her at tea-time yesterday, and she was hinting like mad about Lilley putting her up to some funny business, but she wouldn't say more. When I saw what she was doing, I pieced the rest together."

Strutt sat down on the bed, blew out his cheeks and slowly deflated them. "So that's the milk in the cocoanut!"

"Seems so."

"But why should he pick on me?"

"I don't know. Anyhow, I took him outside during the dance, led him into that alley opposite the hall where I imagined, in my touching simplicity, that no one would see us, and called him all kinds of louse. I pointed out that it would be an unfunny trick at any time, but that with your wife down it was just plain sordid. Only I put it more strongly. He got into a hell of a state—I suppose the loss of his troop hadn't helped him—lost his temper completely and took a poke at me. He cut my chin with that damned signet ring he wears. I was never so surprised in my life. It hurt, too. I asked him if he'd gone crazy, and he just barged away up the hill—to walk it off, I suppose."

Strutt said, "Oh hell, hell, hell." He put on his pyjamas and got into bed. "You knew Elvorden saw?"

"I didn't till to-day. He said he was going to report it, and I tried to stall him off by telling him that damfool horseplay tale. However, Felse beat him to it."

"What a scab that youngster is," Strutt murmured, reaching for the cigarettes.

"Yes," Cassilis agreed, "generally speaking, he is; but of course in this instance he was perfectly right."

"You really think so?"

"Oh, yes. As the men had seen."

"Would you have reported it, if you'd been in his place?"

Cassilis switched off the lights, and they smoked in darkness. "No, I daresay not. But that still doesn't make him wrong. You know, in an earlier century you'd have found young Ives living on top of a column with rusty chains around his waist. He's a natural martyr."

"I can't stand martyrs."

"Nor can I. Or not the introvert martyrs, at any rate. But they're often right on moral issues, which only goes to prove that the good are not always the pleasant. Do you mind if we bed down?"

"No. I'm tired myself."

"I'm going to have nightmares about Lilley," said Cassilis, "nightmares. He looked like death, I tell you, like bloody death; Danny Deever wasn't in it."

"Elvorden's pretty bleak, too. Suffering from reaction. He's had a tough day's thinking, and all for sweet F.A. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Cassilis, and the smell of his extinguished cigarette was acrid on the darkened air.

Eleven o'clock. Mrs. Fogg was snoring, fully-dressed, upon the parlour sofa. She lay on her back, her hat squashed into a halo behind her head, her feet sticking up like the feet of the dead. Eily, in her close and dirty little bedroom, put into a cotton shoe-bag, which was a relic of school-days, her glass bowl and two slices of bread and margarine.

How many miles to Strethamfold?
Three score miles and ten.
Shall I get there by candlelight?
Yes, and back again.

Only it was not three-score and ten miles, but six and a bit; not so far, not to escaping feet and a heart speeded by fear. I will go to Auntie, who will tell me what to do. She was always kind.

A mouse, scrabbling in the wainscot, gave the time signal; six Greenwich pips. Eily crept downstairs, looked in briefly and without admiration at her slumbering mother, and went out into the street. The Geogehans will be surprised when they don't see me to-morrow. Let them wait for me and wonder why I don't come. Oh, aren't we poor, we have only three servants and Eily, now; oh, aren't we sorry for ourselves? Let them sweat. Eily drew a little comfort from the very magnitude of her misfortune; it was bigger than anything, than the Geogehans, than Christenhurst, than England, than the war, than the world. But Auntie must help.

I won't tell her who it was, because they might make me marry him, even if they had to wait till I was old enough; and I would rather die than touch him again. No, I won't tell her. She can't make me.

Mannock, the policeman, came slowly along the street, pausing once or twice to flash his torch into the doorways. Eily slid into shadow until he had gone by, then tiptoed still in shadow until she knew he would be out of earshot. Now she began to walk briskly, straight down the middle of the road, out of Christenhurst and over the hill. Her head felt very heavy and unsure upon her shoulders, as if it were filled with hotted pebbles rolling one against the other. Between the pebbles there was no room for thought.

She walked on and on, unthinking, regarding as in a dream the long sharp shade that went before her. There were the two humps of her padded shoulders, there was the topknot of her hair, grotesquely stretched and bobbling, there were her spindle legs, enormously long and swift. Must be careful going through Grayling, or the bobby there might ask questions, though it would be none of his business.

Two miles, three miles. Half-way there. She was only vaguely aware of the blister that had sprung up through the hole in her stocking; indeed, the pain had a quality faintly easeful, a quality of satisfaction. The hedges now were spinning past at a great rate; surely no human being ever before had walked so fast! A rabbit sped across the road, flashing his bright scut. Somewhere on the hillside, where the woods were pools of dark syrup dripped from a ladle, an owl hooted, a young owl, small and plaintive. Some people are bad with their lights; that one would be shining from

the Priory. Rich people always stay up late. Four miles. And two to go, and two. I'm not tired. I've never been so wide awake. Auntie will help me because she is kind. Please God, let me still be wrong. Let me still be wrong.

Funny that pain, the pain from a rubbed heel, can make one go so fast. I always was a good walker. One more hill, the long one, and then a little hill, and then the sweep down (so easy! I shall fly down it as if I had wings!) into Strethamfold. You would not think one could walk four miles (nearly five) and not meet a single soul. Hope she's left the key under the mat, as she always did. If she hasn't I'll get in somewhere, if I have to climb through a window.

Eily stopped. Suddenly she felt the giddiness of her own speed and for a moment did not know where she was. Where? Just outside Lower Blackshott, a mile from Strethamfold. She remembered a book read to her at school, how Alice floated down the stairs and out into the garden, and how she sped over the chessboard country, her hand in the hand of the Red Queen.

She walked on, conscious now that the miracle of speed had left her, that her feet were as heavy as though the road beneath them were not bright macadam, baked hard by the fire of the moon, but thick, and sticky, and sucking mud. Not so far. Oh, my heel, my heel! It hurts. Not so far. Think of something to carry you on. How many hymns can you remember? O happy band of pilgrims look upwards to the skies. There is a green hill far away without a city wall. (Why should a hill have a wall, anyway?) There is a fountain filled with blood.

Gladys Fogg woke in a sweat and a fright just as the clock struck two. Someone in the room, someone weeping.

"Who is it, who's there?"

She dared not stretch out her hand for the matches lest it be seized by the weeping ghost. The hair rose upon her forehead, at the root of each hair a bubble of freezing sweat.

"Who's there?"

She heard a shuffling, as if someone were rising to their knees, and the weight upon the bed relaxed. The matches rattled in the box, a flame was struck and the candle lit.

"You scared me half out of my mind!" she cried furiously, pressing her hands to her pounding heart.

"I had to come. I walked all the way. There's a blister on my heel."

Eily, claimed utterly by the nightmare, flung herself upon her aunt's broad breasts and lay there shivering.

Gladys, a little recovered, pushed her back on to the pillows and leaning over the bedside to a mahogany commode, brought out a scent bottle half-full of whisky. She drank, and after a while poured a little into the tooth-glass. "Here, drink this down. Stop howling and do as I tell you."

But Eily, even when she had obeyed, could only say, "My foot, my foot."

Gladys, sighing, rose from the bed and huddled into her dressing-gown. She took off the girl's shoe and stocking, peerred at the burst blister and the ugly red transparency beneath it. "Wait a tick, I'll put something on for you." She smeared it with vaseline, stuck a corn-plaster over the torn place and wrapped a bandage across it. "God knows how you'll get your shoe on again."

Eily smiled faintly. She said, "I knew you'd be good, Auntie. You'd help somehow. I couldn't tell Ma, but I knew I could tell you." She related how she had gone to sleep with a soldier in a wood and how she had become sure that she was going to bear his baby.

Gladys Fogg went white. She said, "You did that?"

"He was so miserable."

"When? When you were with me?"

"It was only the once."

"You can't be sure it's as you think!"

"I am so sure," said Eily, so sadly, so surely that Gladys challenged her no further.

Instead, she called her savage names, old names, some of them of country descent.

At last she said, "Who was it? Do you know his name?"

Eily was too tired, had not the wit to say no. She was silent.

Gladys took and shook her. "You tell me!"

I couldn't marry him, and they might make me. If only it had been Vic, I might almost be happy. They might make whoever it was marry me, mightn't they? The Law might make him. She replied, "Vic. Vic Tawney."

"All right." said Gladys with wild energy, "all right.

We'll teach him, the animal! And you only a kid, only a kid. I'd make him so he never could again."

Eily stared stonily at the shadow-dance upon the ceiling. "I won't have to tell Ma, will I? You'll help me. You'll find somewhere for me to go. You're kind."

Gladys trembled. "I'm having no part in this. You'll go back on the first bus to-morrow and tell your ma. It's her business, not mine. She's your mother, not me. I'm having no part in it."

Eily said slowly, turning her small, dull eyes upon the fleshy woman lying at her side, "You'll not help me? You'll not?"

"No. I can't. I wash my hands of it. It was a barmy thing for you to do, to come running out here."

"You made my foot well. You were kind. You don't really mean you won't help me?"

Gladys gazed wildly about the room, as yet unable to realise this tragedy in its fullness. "I can't, don't you see? It isn't that I'm not fond of you, even with what you've done, and there was never any of that in our family before. . . . Did he know how old you was?"

"No."

"God help you," said Gladys, herself weeping, "for I can't."

Eily, seeing this weakness, knew she was lost. Anger she could have overcome; but there was no help to be had from feebleness. The little room, close, low, heavy with the sour-sweet smells of the night, was full of shadows so gigantic that they could not stand upright and were doubled on crutches across the ceiling. They reminded her of Alice in the house that was too small. Somewhere, far away, her aunt's voice ran on and on. "I'll get you on the early bus, get you back before your ma knows. I wash my hands. Understand? You've never been here. I don't know anything. I wash my hands."

Soon Eily fell asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MONDAY

STACEY woke to a black frost and a knocking at the door. One of the girls looked in, plumped down a steaming brass can over which a towel was folded, said, "Ten past seven, madam," and withdrew.

The room was dark and cold, the bed very warm. Stacey counted up to twenty, braced herself and sprang out on to the clammy carpet. She washed perfunctorily, shivering as she stripped and dressed, packed her nightclothes and spongebag, gave a brief look about the room to see that she had forgotten nothing, and went downstairs into the bitter dining-room. Here the blackout was up, and the day was dawning streaked and ruddy over Christenhurst. Two land girls went past the windows, their faces coppered by the hidden sun, their voices as startingly merry in the quiet as voices laughing in church.

No fire in the grate. Breakfast already on the table, growing cold beneath a metal cover. Lucy came in with the teapot. "Going to be a rainy day, madam."

Stacey, drinking a great deal of tea and picking at some lukewarm bacon, thought, How many ghosts we must leave behind us, we visiting wives to the war-time inns; but ghosts that do not haunt our successors, nor are heard by human ears. When the bus has carried us away the chambermaids go upstairs to exorcise our spirits with swab and broom and duster; not even the scent of our powder is left upon the air. You would think that something of the love, the hunger, the loneliness for a moment assuaged, would remain behind, that the voice of the girl who had slept last week in the maple bed would say to this week's girl, "Yes, I, too, was glad to see him; I, too, dare not think about war without end; I, too, always try to disbelieve it when the old men prophesy (as if our lives were worth nothing at all) that it will last five years, seven years, ten; for if I did believe I should be sick with grief." But to-morrow there will be no Stacey at Christenhurst, and nothing in the world to tell that she has ever been.

Lucy came in again. " Sorry, I forgot the sugar."

" Thank you. Would you ask Mrs. Eagles for my bill ? "

" Oh, she isn't up yet, madam ; but I expect she left it at the office. I'll go and see."

Charmian came down, very peaked and cold.

" Hallo," Stacey said, " are you catching the eight-fifteen, too ? "

" Yes, I thought I would. It isn't much fun hanging about here when the men are back at work."

" These places have a nasty ' morning-after,' haven't they ? "

Charmian laughed. " Oh, they have ! They seem to turn sour on Mondays, as if they simply can't wait for you to get out."

" Here's your breakfast. You'll have to hurry a bit."

" That's because I couldn't resist staying in bed just five minutes longer. Wasn't it dark and beastly ? "

But the day, now, was lavender in the streets, a thin and elderly colour, unhopeful. A body of men marched by, the noise of their feet amplified by the silence of the hills. Stacey went to the window and watched them out of sight.

" I love seeing soldiers," Charmian said, eating the bacon as if it were pleasant.

" They bring back memories of my husband's passing-out parade. It was on a morning like this, on top of Salisbury Plain, with a terrific cold mist and smoke all intermingled and floating about like a curtain ; the men parading in their very new uniforms, without Sam Brownes, and the band playing ' The British Grenadiers.' They all looked so young and stiff. I cried ; I don't quite know why. I couldn't make out which was Philip. I was freezing cold, too."

Charmian said, " All sorts of odd things make one cry." They were both silent for a while. Then she asked if Stacey lived in town.

They exchanged addresses, moved circuitously about the preliminaries of future friendship, which are for women so difficult to achieve, and for men so easy.

Stacey said, " Here's my husband. He said he'd come and see me off."

Charmian rose precipitately, said she had to pay her bill and left the room. Stacey ran after her. " You haven't finished your breakfast."

"Oh, I have, really."

"Well, I've got to pay my bill, too."

Lucy appeared at the window of the office, presented the foided sheet. Strutt came in, his cheeks ruddy and cold, kissed Stacey, smiled at Charmian who, when she had received her change, went upstairs. "Don't you make yourself late!" Stacey called after her. She added to her husband, "She's such a baby. I hope I have a daughter like that."

"We'll be pretty old ourselves before that's possible. I say, I've got news for you; the balloon did go up. The B.S.M. reported Lilley before Elvorden could get his oar in, and he's under arrest. Lilley, I mean."

"Oh, poor devil! I'm so sorry. I suppose I'm leaving you to all sorts of excitements?"

"Pretty cruel, isn't it, looking at Lilley's tragedy as 'a sort of excitement?' But we get so bored. Well, got everything? Nightgown? Toothbrush? Left nothing in the drawers?"

"I don't think so."

"Hadn't I better look? You know what you are."

"No, I'm sure it's all right. I think I ought to fetch Charmian down, though, or she'll lose her bus."

"Leave the poor kid alone! She's being tactful. She'll catch it all right."

They went out into the street and waited at the bus stop.

"Why did Lilley hit Cassilis?"

Strutt told her.

Stacey said, wonderingly, "I was thinking, only this morning, that I should go away to-day without leaving the least impression on Christenhurst, that by noon you'd find it hard to believe I'd ever been here. Now it seems that I've played quite a part in a most grandiose upset. Because if I hadn't been at the dance, Cassilis would never have bothered about Gillie Eagles and her jokes."

He was alarmed. "Now don't you start feeling responsible for Lilley's misfortunes! I know you. You've got a horrible sense of sin. You'll be lying awake at night thinking how you've wrecked his life, and beating yourself for it."

"No, I won't," she said sturdily, "because I shall have something else to think about."

He pressed her arm against his side. "You see Kerrigan and wire me. Will you?"

"Just yes or no?"

"That'll do. Here comes your bus, darling. Oh Lord, where's that girl? I knew she'd miss it."

But Charmian came running out of the Fleece, her face cold and rosy under a wreath of dark fur, and she went up to the top deck.

Strutt kissed his wife. "We'll see each other soon."

"Of course we will."

"Don't forget the wire."

"I won't."

"I love you. Be good."

"I love you, too. It was such a nice week-end." Once more they kissed, and then Stacey ran up to join Charmian. The bus moved off. She saw Strutt walking back towards the mess. He smiled and waved to her. Christenhurst glided backwards into the dawn, and time.

Lilley, sitting over an oilstove, his breakfast tray untouched upon the radiator, wrote a letter to his wife.

"I'm in trouble, and there's no point in keeping it from you as it's bound to affect the future. During a dance on Saturday night Cassilis (you saw him when you came down—a lanky chap with a long nose, arty type) and I got into a row. We went outside to get on with it. He called me some names and I lost my temper and hit him. Though we didn't know it at the time several of the men and one of the subalterns saw.

"The B.S.M. reported it last night and I'm under close arrest. This means a court martial. As I haven't a leg to stand on I shall either get pushed out of the army, or at worst, cashiered. So you see, I've done for myself as you always said I would do, in your nice, encouraging way. You never were what they call a helpmeet, were you?

"I don't suppose you're dying to stand by your dear husband now he's in distress, are you, Bunty? So you'd better have that louse Fossdyck if you want him. I'll divorce you all right, and without too much heartburning. It will be nice for you to have a Civil Service wallah who can keep the bed warm for you at night, a service that is, alas, no longer very often in my power since our *dear* country

thought I ought to go and win its damned war for it. If you want to know why I wouldn't let you go before, it was simply because I didn't see why you should have all the fun. Besides, I had to take care of you, hadn't I ? Imagine what would have happened if I'd let you divorce me for that greasy clarinet-player you liked so much. Most likely you'd be on the streets by now.

" So don't think, darling, that I'm expecting any sympathy from you. You'll just be screaming wild about how I've disgraced you. You haven't enough imagination to know how sick I am that I haven't the guts to cut my throat. I can just see you going red in the face, getting blotchy all round your neck (you always do that when you're in one of your lovely tempers) and doing something dainty and self-controlled like burning all my papers and pouring ink all over my shirts.

" Go ahead, make what arrangements you like. I only hope that one day you may know a tenth of what I'm going through now—just a tenth.

" I suppose we had some good times together, just at first, when you were a big, beautiful blonde all gasps and goggle-eyes. Thanks for the memory. Lucky, isn't it, that we never had the children you didn't want ?

" I'll stop now and let you get over the shock.

" Your devoted and done-for husband,

" BERTIE.

" P.S.—My God, Bunty, have your scream out, but try to imagine what this means to me, how it feels. Just try and think of me for a change."

He fumbled with numb hands through his suitcase, found an envelope, addressed it and stuffed the letter in. He licked a stamp, affixed it, in irony, crosswise : a kiss. A kiss for Bunty. His heart rose, liquid and hot, into his throat, and he struggled to force it down. Can't cry. Can't do that again. Any one might come in. If there's any hope, it's to put a good face on things.

Looking at the letter, he wondered if they would let him send it. Suppose they pick it open ? Unfolding it, he scratched out the words, *Since our dear country thought I ought to go and win its damned war for it*, and over the dense black scoring wrote, " Since I joined up." He saw a large waterdrop fall on to the paper, smudging the ink, and for a

moment could not think how it had got there. Then he took two swift little steps to the door, locked it, and returned to the centre of the room. He stood there by the stove, a stoutish young man with moustaches, a young man with soft pink hands and feminine hips, bitterly crying. Without shame, without hope. A plump young man weeping on a frosty morning.

Mamma we're not talking to Bertie. Bertie's in Coventry.

What has the poor little boy done ?

We just don't like him, Mamma.

Bertie cheats. Bertie told a lie to-day.

No, Bertie can't be the sheriff. He's got to be an Indian.

A plump young man in battledress, tunic unbuttoned, swaying a little on stockinged feet.

Lilley ? Don't put him on to the Van Rensselaer sale. Bit hairy round the heel, Lilley.

No, it's sweet of you, Bertie, really, and I am honoured, honestly—one is, you know—but I'm not fond of you in quite that way.

Do you ever *shoot*, Mr. Lilley ?

Shoot. Oh yes, I'll shoot. One of these days I'll shoot the lot of you, grind your faces to jelly and climb on top of you, up and up and up. I'll climb so high you won't be able to reach me, not even to drag yourselves out of the slime, and I'll be so far away that I shan't be able to hear you any more. Yes, I'll shoot. I'll show you who's got the brains, I'll show you who's going to get the money, the power.

Please, sir, Lilley struck his compass in my neck.

A plump young man, holding out his trembling hands to the stove, muttering mindlessly through a mucous of tears, " I'll show them one day, I'll show them."

Gillie was shopping. She peered through the darkness of Mrs. Piggot's shop, where the floor sloped to three levels, where belts, slumber-nets and stockings hung like cobwebs from invisible crossbars, where cardboard boxes pink and green and white, incorrectly labelled, were stocked at random on shelves too narrow, on bales of black-out cloth, and on toppling masses of wool.

" Now can't you find me just half a yard of elastic ? " Gillie pleaded. " You must have a bit stuck away somewhere."

" Not unless I give you me garters," Mrs. Piggot retorted, " and I'm doing that for no one. Anything else ? Stockings?"

Gillie mentally rejected those she saw about her, which were opaque, and had a furry surface. " No, thanks. Oh, half a minute ; let me have a look in that case."

" The flower buttonholes ? Miss Foley makes them special. I've done quite a trade in them."

" Have you a blue one ? "

" Only what you see. Oh, I've done well in the luxuries since the soldiers came, Mrs. Eagles. The girls like to doll up for them. Not that I won't be glad when they go away again."

" Who, the soldiers ? Why ? "

Mrs. Piggot's face narrowed. " Upsets us all, especially them bits of girls. They were decent before all this happened. Never saw so much as a glimmer through the blinds anywhere after nine, and now look at it ! Standing round the corners at all hours. The Vicar's not pleased about it, I can tell you."

" Oh, come, that's being a kill-joy. Isn't it nice to have a little life in a place like this ? "

" Life isn't everything. Not this life on earth. Or so the Bible tells us." The shop was stifling, suddenly, with her goodness.

" Well, we'll all be moving on soon, I expect," Gillie said, subconsciously identifying herself with the army, with those in transit.

" We ? " Mrs. Piggot picked up the words sharply. " Why, are you thinking of leaving us ? "

" No. No, of course not. Did I say ' we ? ' I meant ' they.' The soldiers." She opened her bag. " That's all, then. Just the ribbon, the cotton and the knitting-needles."

" Two-and-seven," said Mrs. Piggot. She added. " Anyway, I don't think those girls ought to be let in the public-houses. And I'd put those that took them there in jail."

" I assure you," said Gillie stiffly, rising to the challenge, " that any girls who come to the Fleece always behave quietly and well. My husband wouldn't tolerate anything else. Most of them have soft drinks, anyway, and those who do touch alcohol seldom take more than one glass."

" You've got your living to earn. Two-and-seven, and five makes three shillings, and two and six, and two, and two, and sixpence makes ten. Thank you."

"It's lucky all the shopkeepers don't feel as you do, Mrs. Piggot. The soldiers must have made a great difference to village trade generally."

"There's things worth more than money. Good-day, Mrs. Eagles."

Gillie went out into the drizzling day. The village, grey and cold, pervaded by the smell of damp evergreens. She smiled at Pickering, who was walking moodily towards the Battery Office, said to him, out of an obscure impulse to comfort any one who might be as irritable as she, "Never mind, captain, the sun will shine again."

He replied gallantly, and quite vaguely, that it had shone since she arose that morning, and he nodded towards her bright wet hair.

What do you know about that? she said to herself, and was comforted. She had not realised, until that moment, that her faith in her own attraction had begun to desert her. Her contacts with the men who nightly crowded the bar of the Fleece had been poor comfort; even Tawney's passion, Toller's dogged love, had been little to set beside the dominant fact that her unloved husband no longer desired her bed. That he was unloved made it all the worse; the impertinence that is so much more hurtful than insult, for insult is, at least, an offering of malice on a large scale. Who was Sam to refuse that which so many desired? Sam! Cumbrous, slow, grey, without charm, without youth, without wit. Sam! A soft, warm mountain of a man, with eyes that saw, but would not communicate the vision to his thoughts. Sam! A man who made a fool of her by his convenient kindness, a man who made a fool of her by making a fool of himself. What have I become that I cannot charm Sam?

But she knew now, as through a revelation sprung from nothing save, perhaps, a change in the perfume of the wind, in the note of a waterdrop falling from a leaf to the pavement, that she had that charm; that he knew it, that it tormented him, but that he had stamped it down into the sediment of his mind and fastened the seals above the pit. The sense of her own beauty, which was a thing dependent upon the confidence that she could persuade from others a belief in that beauty, filled her with grace as a meadow is filled with light. Feathers sprouted to her heels and straight up her body sprang a rod of flowering joy. She believed now in some-

thing she had never before believed: in her own goodness. She had beauty to spill, and because it was desired of her she would be generous. By a miracle the sun did shine, even as it should, at that moment, have shone. It was a thin gleam, pale as white wine shaken in a clouded glass; but it filled the wet pavements with image and cloud, with colours not of the trees or the sky, but influenced by their being.

Why should I stay here for ever in this village, Gillie thought, when in a little while the world will pass it by? If Sam really doesn't care to hold me perhaps he will let me go. Toller would marry me if I were free. Toller is director of a housing estate. He showed me some pictures of lovely white houses with diamond panes and garages looking like old-fashioned barns with green lawns all about. That would be the life for me. I could start again and be happy. Make Clifford a good wife—which I swear I'd do—even though he is as dull as ditch-water.

She walked up the lane by All Saints churchyard on her way to see Miss Webbe, who was making Sam some shirts.

If only Vic Tawney were something instead of nothing! But I'm marrying no gunners. Next time I'll have a man who can make his way in the world. It shows I'm not greedy, doesn't it, that money doesn't count much with me? Because Vic must have quite a private income, the way he goes on sometimes. I wish he hadn't been so silly, because then I should still have had my bracelet.

The organist was practising in the loft, and the music flew sweet from the heights of All Saints.

"Jesu, joy of man's desiring."

Gillie liked that tune. It made her feel that there was a great deal of good in her, yes, a great deal; and that she could have shown it to all the world had the world treated her differently.

Might marry Clifford, yes; but there's plenty of time to think about it.

Six or seven men in singlets and shorts came running downhill, sifting into single file as the lane narrowed. Among them was Tawney, slender and long, the flesh of his throat and arms as smooth and shining as stretched kid-leather. Gillie smiled as he passed by, desiring to communicate even

to him her joy, her beauty and her new freedom. She had stepped up the bank and was standing now against a hawthorn hedge thick-netted with berries. A smiling young woman, the goddess of this place. She received with simplicity the unspoken admiration, and when the men had gone walked on, determined to say something kind and complimentary that would make Miss Webbe happy too. Poor Miss Webbe, lonely in her cottage, an ugly old witch-tongue making shirts to eke out a pension. No lover for Miss Webbe, no husband, no children. Though children were the least of it. Nice to have a child, of course. Women were made to have children, and no woman who was not half-dead already would want to go through life without knowing that obvious experience ; but kids could be exhausting. Could make you seem (even if you had them at seventeen) as old as sin. If I did leave Sam he could have the custody of Mike. It would be a sacrifice for me, of course ; but Mike likes Louisa better than he likes his mother, and shouldn't his happiness come first ?

She went into the cottage, turned her sunlight upon Miss Webbe and said, " How pretty your dahlias are ! You know, I think you've got a real gift for arranging flowers. I've often told Sam so."

Miss Webbe looked slightly surprised. She was not noticeably lifted in spirits by the compliment, and she made no remark.

Menhenheott spoke to Strutt. " Dakin had a wire this morning, sir, to say his mother's ill and has to have an immediate operation. He'd like compassionate leave, if that's possible."

" Oh yes, I should think it would be. Do you know what's wrong with her ? "

" Hernia, I think, sir. She's an elderly woman, too. My mother had the same, and she went through a bad time." He hesitated. " Dakin's in an awful state this morning."

" Aren't we all ? " Strutt replied, and coughed away the indiscretion. " All right. Give me the telegram. I'll take it to the B.C. and try to get things fixed up straight away. I suppose he wants to get off this afternoon ? "

" Well, he's in no state for work," Menhenheott murmured. " Sir, there's the colonel's car."

"Oh, Lord, is it? We weren't expecting him so early." He added, feeling the need to ease himself by offering a confidence, "He's come about Mr. Lilley. Bad business, isn't it?—You needn't pass that on."

"No, sir, I shan't. You know, it seems awful; something you might do in civvy street, without any one giving a damn, just puts the pot on you for life if you do it in the army. I know it is fair, but somehow it doesn't seem so." Menhenheott looked puzzled. "Of course, it has got to be that way. Still, one feels sorry."

"One does," Strutt agreed, "damned sorry. All right, sergeant. I'll see about Dakin's leave right now." He went into the Battery Office, where he found Pickering and Penry Sturgess on their knees by the filing cabinet, making re-adjustments in a card index. "The colonel's here."

Pickering rose. "What, already? All right. I'll get along."

"Oh, and Dakin's asked for compassionate leave. Mother's going into hospital for an operation. Hernia. He's had a wire."

"Right. Send him off directly it's confirmed. Give him seventy-two hours and he can apply for an extension if necessary. Where are you going now?"

"To the M.T. park."

"Oh, well. Is Elvorden there?"

"I think so."

"Tell him I want to see him before lunch, then, will you?" Pickering nodded to Sturgess. "Think you can finish that up by yourself?"

"Yes, sir; it's pretty straightforward now."

The B.K. left the office. Strutt sat down to sign papers, to prolong the small, comfortable indoor jobs so agreeable on frosty mornings.

Tom Berry, in civilian life, was a poet and a grocer, his father owning a quiet and excellent business in a street behind Gray's Inn Road. Tom spent most of his evenings at the Doubleday, in Charlotte Street, though here he found himself frustrated and ill-at-ease, conscious of the fact that the other poets he met there were either in the advertising business or the B.B.C., and convinced that their failure to admire his own work was actuated by snobbery, and snobbery

alone. He had two ambitions : one, to have a poem published in *Vision*, and the other, to call other poets by their Christian names. To date, he had got no further than looking at them.

By a fortuitous commingling of all that was best in the looks of his father and his mother, neither of them handsome people, Tom had turned out to be a handsome lad, straight-nosed, blue-eyed, curly-haired. Because his was not a face on which frustration sat well, he was considered by the poets who knew him only by sight to look rather silly ; they would not have recognised him had they seen him in battledress. In the army he was perfectly happy, a blithe, efficient and unambitious gunner who felt no social disabilities whatsoever and, indeed, was often proud to think that one day he would be a master-man, an employer of labour. He wrote a good deal of poetry, and because there was no one to pull it to pieces (his two friends at the Doubleday were, respectively, an unpaid film reviewer and a commercial artist who would for ever be famous for creating a personification of Voltage) thought it exceedingly good.

Upon this Monday morning he was one of a fatigue-party scrubbing out the NAAFI floors. Two hours or so ago, as he was listening to the breakfast news bulletin, a wonderful line had entered his head. There had been the usual reports : patrol activity in Egypt ; the defenders of Stalingrad still holding out ; fighting continued in the Solomons during the past twenty-four hours. Tom had thought. Everything's stopped dead. Nothing's happening. Is this lull going on forever ?

And then :

" Suddenly there was no news."

Yes, a poem ! A significant, timely poem, to pin the war to a square of paper like a butterfly to a cork. Suddenly there was no news ; and I—and I . . .

Suddenly, there was no news ;
And I, lost on a map,
My tent pitched by a . . .

That wouldn't do. Find some sequence of metaphor, imagine the poet drinking from a river made by a single line

of ink. My tent pitched by a . . . No tents. Sounds like Songs of Araby. Well, anyway, it's a good first line.

Suddenly there was no news.

Tom had a heady vision of the future, of an essay in which he would read, 'T. H. Berry's *Suddenly there was no news* was the nodal point in the poetry of the present war. Prior to its appearance in *Vision*, in the winter of 1942, there had been no remarkable expression by the serving soldier of his own peculiarly deflected outlook, etc., etc. . . .'; of a conversation between two celebrated poets, beginning: 'But you must admit that Berry's *Suddenly* is the most important contribution to the poetry of the present war.' 'But my dear, I do admit it; though whether Berry's a one-poem man remains to be seen. I used to know him slightly; a curly-haired, quiet chap. Sat in the Doubleday night after night, but never seemed keen to talk.'

So Tom dreamed as, a pail in each hand, and in each pail a brush and a bar of yellow soap, he wandered back from the stores to the NAAFI, a figure in outline faintly reminiscent of a milkmaid in a nursery rhyme.

Suddenly, there was no news,
And I, on a map benighted . . .

And I, benighted on the map,
Pitched by the scribbled river . . .

The Doubleday would know him, and the Café Royal. He would call them Lucas and Rhisiart and Wynwood, when Wynwood came back, of course. Perhaps he would not, after all, be a grocer but would get a job with the B.B.C.

He found himself staring at the shrivelled face, listening to the running voice of a little furious woman who, pitched in his path, was demanding whether he were deaf or crazy. Tom, a great man now, who could afford to deal whimsically with situations on which in the future he might be able to dine out, put down his cans. "Madam, I'm so sorry! I was distrait."

"Do you know Tawney?" cried Mrs. Fogg, "do you know Tawney?"

Tom replied, " Yes. A tall, dark chap. In C troop."

" You tell him I want him ! " She drew the air rapidly, in little sucks, through her clenched teeth, as if by so doing she were saving herself from spontaneous combustion.

" Now look, madam," Tom said silkily, " I'm willing to oblige, but I don't know when I'll be seeing him. Anyway, not till dinner-time."

" You tell him, you tell him. Tell him to come to Yew Cottage the moment he's off to-night, or he'll be sorry. Mind ! You tell him if he doesn't he'll wish he'd not been born." She turned and raced towards her home, looking back once to throw at him, over her shoulder, " Wish he'd not been born ! "

Tom stared after her, all thoughts of poems driven from his head. Then, picking up the pails, he returned to the NAAFI, distributed them, and resumed his work. As he scrubbed he told his friends what had occurred. " Who is the old girl ? " Tom was newly-come to Christenhurst, and did not yet know all the local people by name.

" That's Eily Fogg's ma. Didn't you know ? "

" Perhaps he's had a bunk-up with Eily," one of them suggested, and the rest roared with mirth at the witticism.

" I suppose I'd better tell him," Tom said. " Tawney's the chap who got chucked out of the O.C.T.U.s, isn't he ? "

" That's him. He's a good bloke. Look, there's old Toffit over there. Ask him to pass it on, why don't you ? "

Tom said diffidently, " Well, it seems a personal sort of message. I think I'd better tell him myself."

They spent a pleasant morning speculating, wittily, cunningly, absurdly and obscenely, how Victor Tawney might have offended Mrs. Fogg. By the time the floor was clean, the subject had been so thoroughly exhausted that Tom was able once more to concentrate upon his poem ; yet try as he would, he could not quite remember the first line. The news suddenly ceased ? Suddenly the news came to an end ?

Well, at any rate, he had a word : *Suddenly*. Much better than nothing.

He did, as it happened, run into Tawney outside the NAAFI at dinner-time.

" I say, half a tick."

Tawney stopped, and smiled.

"I've got a message for you from a Mrs. Fogg."

"Fogg?" Tawney looked utterly bewildered. "Eily's mother?"

"So it seems. She said she wanted to see you at Yew Cottage directly you knocked off this evening." Tom paused and went a little red. "She said some tripe about you being sorry if you didn't."

"But this is crackers! I don't know anything about the old drunk. Can you remember her exact words?"

"Well, she said you'd be better dead than not go, as a matter of fact."

"Look here, Berry, this is crazy-week. Was she very insistent? It sounds like it."

"Insistent," said Tom deprecatingly, "was not the word for it."

"Oh. Well, anyway, thanks for letting me know. Have a drink with me to-night, will you? You'll be in the Lamb, I expect."

"I felt," said Tom, who realised that he was speaking to one who might understand a literary currency, "a bit like one of those heralds who had to bring bad news to the king and usually got bashed for it."

"Oh, it isn't bad; or not so far as I know. It's just barmy. I must go and eat now. So long." Tawney smiled, and went into the NAAFI.

At half-past six he came to Yew Cottage and pulled at the greasy string that worked the bell.

Mrs. Fogg opened to him so swiftly that it seemed she must have lain in wait for him behind the door. She was neat, sober and menacing. She wore a maroon silk dress patterned with blue and yellow flowers, and her hair was combed.

"Come in, Mr. Tawney," she said, suggesting a curtsey as she whisked him into the dark, sour parlour and closed the door. "We're not very splendid in here, not what you're used to. Still you've got to do the listening, haven't you, and it's no atter what place you listen in if there's something important to be told, is it?"

He glanced with uneasy distaste about the room, noted the dust lying in fluff upon the maimed piano, the litter of matches, burned paper and hair-combings carelessly raked

behind a fire-screen. He said gently, " Mrs. Fogg, I'm afraid I haven't the slightest idea what all this is about. Is anything wrong ? "

She motioned him to a seat, pulled a chair out from the table and poised herself upon the edge of it, smoothing the skirt of her best dress. In her face was a calculating malevolence, the shrewdness of ill-thinking to profitable ends. Her glance, black-bright, darted and flashed. Springing up, she seized a soiled cocoa-cup that had been left upon the mantelpiece and slid it away behind the window-curtains. " What must you think of us ? But when you're poor you don't get no help and the house goes to pieces however nice you try to keep it." She snapped at him, so suddenly that he started in his seat, " What are you going to do about Eily ? "

" Eily ? "

" Oh, perhaps you don't know who Eily is. Wouldn't it be strange if you didn't, now ? "

Tawney said sharply, " Of course I know who she is. Now come on, tell me what's wrong."

Mrs. Fogg drew her chair closer to his, wriggling it over the carpet by the movement of her feet and body. She said in a little, mild voice, " You beast, doing what you did to my girl."

He understood. For a second he felt an impulse to laugh, to knock down the walls of the room with his laughter ; but this was succeeded by a creeping fear, a fear that startled and dismayed him. " I've had nothing whatsoever to do with Eily, Mrs. Fogg."

" You haven't ? I wonder how she's got as she has, then. Yes, Mr. Tawney, my little girl's in trouble, in trouble, see ? And you wouldn't be the dadda, would you ? You're too much the gentleman. You don't live in a house like this. You think you can have everything you want just by asking. I wonder what your officer is going to say to you ? "

Tawney said, " She can't be. She's only a kid."

" Do you know how old she is ? " Mrs. Fogg's smile had in it an element of weird pleasure.

" About sixteen. I suppose. Not much more."

" She'll be fifteen next week. Know what that means, don't you, you swell pig with your ladidah voice ? Fifteen next week. What's your officer going to say when I tell him ? "

He went to lean against the mantelpiece, regarding vaguely in the yellowed glass his own dark, shocked face. " Once I bought Eily her seat in the pictures and took her to supper at Cooper's Café in Strethamfold. I've had nothing more to do with her. I wouldn't. I couldn't ! "

Mrs. Fogg, arising, came to share the hearthrug with him. They stood there in silence like household gods, the one straight and tall, the other grotesque and tiny, no higher than a twelve-years child. " If she was older I'd make you marry her, see ? Perhaps your ma and pa might not approve. Eily wouldn't be good enough, would she ? I expect you're going to marry one of them society girls, isn't that it ? "

She went to answer a knocking at the door. " I'm Mrs. Geogehan's cook," said a face round and bright as a kitchen clock, " we was worried that Eileen might be ill, as she didn't come this morning."

" She's got a bad head. She'll be back to-morrow. We couldn't send word as there was no one to send."

Tawney tried to control his racing thoughts. This was crazy, this was lunatic ; no one would believe such a story. Let her tell the B.C. Let her tell the whole Battery about her wretched, unhappy little girl. They know me, they know I could no more touch Eily than I could touch a . . . a . . . He could think of no less likely thing to touch. Let her tell.

He thought of his mother, the successful barrister-at-law. She'd know a way out. But pray God she never hears of this, pray God she never has to find a way. Let the old woman tell ; I'll manage this on my own.

Mrs. Fogg, having ended her exchanges with the cook, returned to the hearth. She said, " Well ? And what have you got to say ? "

" I want to see Eily."

" She's in no state. Half-dead, she is, with worry and fright. You've done enough to her."

" I've a right to see her."

" Oh, you're talking rights, are you ? Had all the rights up to now, haven't you ? "

He felt a surge of strengthening rage. " Go and fetch her."

She started to speak, checked herself. She left the room, and in a moment or so returned with Eily.

The girl was tear-stained and grubby, her face vacant beneath the wool of her unbrushed hair. She wore a pink

dressing-gown over her day-dress, pink felt slippers on her feet. When she saw Tawney she drew back as if she feared he might strike her.

He came to her, took her hands in his and looked gravely into her sliding eyes. "Eily. Did you tell your mother you were in trouble through me?"

Her lips moved.

"Did you? Don't be frightened."

She gasped, "Yes."

"But it wasn't true, was it? You must tell the truth. I'll try to help you all I can, I promise. We'll make things right for you somehow. It wasn't true?"

She snatched her hands from him and the tears spurted over her lashes. "It is true! It is true!"

He said wonderingly, "But Eily, you know it's not. Why are you trying to hurt me like this? I've never hurt you. I've never even been alone with you."

"It is true, it is true," she repeated, looking wildly about her, and ran from the room. He heard her stumbling upstairs, heard the slam of a door.

Tawney turned to Mrs. Fogg, who was frightfully smiling. "Did you put her up to this? You know yourself there's no truth in it."

"Will your officer know? I'm going to him."

He was silent.

"Or I even mightn't."

He looked inquiringly at her.

"If we wasn't poor, Eily could go away somewhere. You aren't poor, are you? Are you poor?"

"What is it," said Tawney, out of a dragging dream, "money?"

"I could have her cared for."

"You can get years for blackmail."

"You can get more years for what you've done."

"Tell this nonsense to whom you like. They'll laugh at you."

"There's things that can't be proved, that you can't prove," said Mrs. Fogg. She sat down again, assuming a certain daintiness. "Now, don't you be a silly lad. You've had your fun and you must pay."

"Fun? With that poor little thing?" he burst out, tormented beyond the power of thought.

She continued, as if he had not spoken, "You can pay, can't you? You're not a bad fellow. She's flighty, and you mightn't have known she wasn't grown up, might you, with the way girls dress and make-up these days? I'm not one to blame you altogether. Young men are wild, and when they're soldiers they're worse. You go off and have a think. I won't say anything to your officer, yet, not just yet."

His one thought was to get out of the rank and horrible room, out of its webbed shadows, its echoes of fear and cruelty. I'll tell her to go to hell. Any one would know how absurd it was. I can manage this myself. A voice from his youth, a small, laughing, affectionate voice, came rippling upwards through the years. All by yourself? He'll never do it all by himself. Never. Oh, never. He'll never do it all by himself.

"I'll see you again to-morrow," he said loudly, more loudly than he had intended, and fought his way through invisible enemies into the clean air, into the cleanly shock of a damp and rose-red twilight.

CHAPTER NINE

MONDAY NIGHT

"I SHALL go mad," said Strutt to Glaiden, "mad, mad, mad! What's the matter with this place, everything going wrong at once? Know how many bodies I had for gun drill this afternoon? Five. Yes, five. One of my Number Ones is a carpenter, so they had him out putting up shelves in the NAAFI. All the drivers were up at the M.T. park. One man sick, one on leave. How the devil can I give them any training if this sort of thing goes on?" He glared at Gillie's pink statuette, added, "I wish they'd take that eyesore and stick it in the salvage."

Glaiden shrugged. If you're feeling bad, so are we all. It's the general upset. Have another?"

"Thanks. It would help."

The Fleece was not so full as usual and there was no more custom than Sam could handle alone, so Gillie, thin and

livery in a dress of parrot green, was playing darts with one of the local farmers.

Glaiden returned from the bar. " Cheero, old boy."

" Cheero. I say, any idea what the colonel said ? "

" Not the details ; but Lilley is going to R.H.Q. tomorrow."

" Thank God for that. It's just like having a corpse in the house. Any one seen him ? "

" Any of us ? No. Poor swine." Glaiden peered down into his glass, into the belts of lighted colour graduating from dark brown to amber, from amber to a sediment of pure, bright gold. " You know, I think I'll go on the wagon soon."

" Good Lord," Strutt said, " Why ? "

" This business has scared me up. Suppose I should get just a little out of control one night and do a Lilley ? "

" He wasn't drunk."

" No. Still, it's a thing you could do if you were." Glaiden poked the fire, mournfully watched the dissolution of a burning continent, the crumbling of the mountains, the valleys sinking into the darkness, the myriad cities falling in a moment, leaving behind them only a desert of scorched rocks. " I've done some things when I was. Most curious things."

Cassilis came in out of the rain, the water glistening on his eyelids and his long, delicate nose. He joined them. " What are you having, Glaiden ? "

" Nothing, thanks."

" Good Lord, what's up ? "

" Precisely what Strutty said ; must have a reputation, mustn't I ? Nothing's up. I'm going to have an early night, that's all." He picked down his cap and mackintosh from the stand, tipped his cane to them and went out. The draught from the doors rattled the dry honesty in the vases.

Gillie, having finished her game, came across the lounge to take Cassilis' order. She brought the glasses to the fire and, unbidden, sat down. Sam, talking livestock with one of the farmers, looked out at her above his own mechanically-moving lips.

" Mind ? " Gillie asked, stretching her feet to the club fender.

Strutt said nothing.

Cassilis replied mildly, " Your house, Mrs. Eagles."

" Oh, yes." She inspected her finger nails, which were very small and inclined to brittleness. " But when I sit down in it Mr. Strutt gets up and goes out."

He had, in fact, half-risen. Cassilis pulled him down again. " You know," he said to Gillie, " I can't really blame Mr. Strutt for being cross with you."

Gillie nodded. For a moment her stone-cold eyes were warmed and lighted. " That's what I want to get over. I want to say sorry." She smiled. " O.K. ? " Strutt did not answer. " Look here, it was a silly sort of joke, I know, but I didn't mean anything by it. Come on, now. Be friends. I know you're not exactly fond of me, but you can't not accept an apology, can you ? "

" It's quite all right," he said stiffly, " so far as I'm concerned."

Cassilis interposed, " Let's all drink on it then, shall we ? What would you like, Mrs. Eagles ? No, don't get up. I'll fetch whatever it is."

" Thanks. I'll have a light ale."

" Nothing warmer ? Whisky ? "

She shook her head. " Thanks, all the same."

When he was at the bar she said to Strutt, " You're blaming me for all this business about Bert."

" You've heard ? "

She made a gesture of impatience. " Of course."

" From whom ? "

" From the whole Battery. What did you think ? "

" All right. But if you hadn't tried to play games on me, it wouldn't have happened."

" Listen," she said, " I'd nothing against you personally. Believe that, will you ? "

Seeing in her for a fleeting second the violence of beauty that conquered Tawney, made a fool of Toller and charmed but could not touch Cassilis, Strutt smiled, and his face was young.

Gillie clapped her hands. " He does believe it ! Hooray. Mr. Cassilis, he's forgiven me ! "

Cassilis gave her the tankard, which she raised to the men.

" Cheero," she said. She drank deeply and daintily. " Look here, is Bert really for it ? "

" I'm afraid so," Cassilis replied.

"Will you"—she hesitated—"will you have to tell what it was all about at the court martial?"

"Not in detail, I hope."

"Oh." She sighed. "Well, thank God for that. I was seeing myself in the witness box, swathed in crepe and fox furs. An American witness-box, where your legs show."

"There won't be a witness-box," Cassilis assured her.

Strutt said, "I can't find any fun in the affair myself. Not a grain."

"Rebuked," said Gillie, examining her own face in the beer as in a sepia print. "Sorry. Can't be matey for long, can you, Mr. Strutt?"

Elvorden came in, bought a drink from Sam and came at once to the fire. He looked quite exhausted, as if he had run five miles, supperless, through the dark. "Any one playing darts?"

"I'm not stopping," Strutt told him.

"You, Cass?"

"No, not to-night."

"Well, you will, Gillie. You will, won't you?" He laid his hand on her arm. "Please."

She gave him a stare so prolonged that it seemed as if he and she were alone in the room. "What's the matter? Not well?"

"I'm quite well," he said irritably, "why shouldn't I be?"

She replied slowly, "I don't know why you shouldn't. I'm not God. All right, I'll play with you."

He left her, walked across the room and began to rub down the slate with the violence of a partisan erasing the wall-scribblings of a political opponent.

"Poor little soul," she murmured to Cassilis, who had risen to follow Strutt, "Is it Lilley he's taking so hard? I'll have to cheer him up."

"You're quite a kind girl, Mrs. Sam," Cassilis told her quietly, using the most intimate form of address she had ever heard from him, "you're nice to people you're sorry for. I like that about you."

"Thank you *so* much, dear, *kind* sir," said Gillie, staring at him, bobbing a curtsey.

When Strutt and Cassilis had gone, she joined Elvorden. While they played he drank far more heavily than was his

custom. " I wouldn't," she said softly, " you'll have such a thick head to-morrow, you know."

" My head's my business. I like your head best, Gillie. It's beautiful. All that hair." He was flushed and miserable and, for the moment, in love ; a handsome boy at breaking-point. " Come out with me your next night off."

" Silly."

" I'm not. Come out with me and we'll have dinner somewhere."

" Sam's watching."

" Sam's deaf, dumb and blind. He doesn't care what you do."

" Shut up," said Gillie, with quiet violence.

" I beg your pardon."

" I should think so."

" I do. I beg your pardon. Will you come out with me ? "

" I don't know. I'll tell you to-morrow." She gave him a professional, public smile. " You want a double six now."

" You think I'm tight." He threw, missing the board.

" No, I don't," she retorted impatiently. " Look what you're doing, will you ? "

Toller came in. Gillie waved to him in relief. " Come on, Clifford. You play. Oh, let's chuck this game, Ives, shall we ? Start a new one."

" Only fifteen minutes to go," Toller said.

Elvorden picked out his darts and flung them on to the window ledge. He went out without a good-night.

Toller said, " I don't much want to play if you don't."

Gillie pushed back the hair from her face, blew out her lips. " I don't care one way or the other." She walked over to the radiogram, turned it up at full blast :

> I've got spurs that jingle, jangle, jingle
> As I go riding merrily along ;
> And they say, O ain't you glad you're single . . .

" Marry me," Toller murmured. He touched her hip, thinking himself unobserved.

Moving suddenly away, Gillie began to straighten a vase upon the sill. The honesty crackled, and a leaf or two fell. The bar was full ; the smoke hanging like a catafalque at cornice-level rippled in the many intersecting draughts.

Someone had made a swathe of silver paper and bound it modestly about the breasts of the pink statuette. Between the floor and the smoke the air circulated thickly, darkly golden.

Sam cried, in a high, womanish voice, "Gillie! You're not a visitor here!"

Turning, she stared at him, felt the heat rising up her throat.

He was on tiptoe, looming very tall over the bar. The room was silent; as in a child's game of Statues, poses were held, glasses arrested half-way to parted lips.

"You come and get on with your job!" cried Sam. He smacked up the counter-flap, cleared the passageway. "Get on with the damned job, see?"

Gillie's head was singing with fury. Sam! How dare you, Sam? You poor, huge, fat, grey, ugly toad of a man, to speak to me like that in a room-full of people! She smiled brightly, felt the tackiness of the smile upon her dry lips.

"All right, Sambo, I'm coming. Sorry. The relief arrives!" She passed through the flap, withdrawing herself from contact with his body, swung round lightly as a dancer and faced every one, still smiling, arms outstretched. "Back on the job! O.K. Who's first?"

Mulcaster, who had been drinking stout at the far, bleak end of the room, slipped quietly out and over the road, to tell the Lamb that Sam Eagles had, for the first time, made a public fool of his wife.

Tom Berry was growing embarrassed. He had, on entering the Lamb at seven o'clock that night, seen Victor Tawney alone and withdrawn, sitting stiffly on the horsehair settee that took up the largest, darkest and coldest portion of the Lamb's private bar. Thinking only to claim a promised drink and not pausing to consider why any one in his senses should choose to be out of the warmth and company and light, Tom had walked straight into a horrible and, it seemed to him, senseless tale. Certainly, he had had his drink, had in fact received five drinks and paid, to date, for two. Tawney, despairingly, steadily drunk, was telling for the seventh time a tale that seemed to him logical enough. He spoke slowly and clearly, severing each word from its fellow. "You don't mind listening, Berry, I know you don't. Must

tell someone, and rather tell a stranger. You'd want to tell a stranger too, wouldn't you? Not that you're one really. You know what I mean. So you see, I'm caught, sunk, devilled and damned." He smiled with some degree of dolorous pleasure at his own phrase-making. "There's nothing to do."

"Oh, look here," Tom protested, "it's all easy enough if only one looks at it the right way." He himself was quite sober; he had the beginnings of a head-cold, and his colds always seemed to absorb his beer. "Eily can't prove it's you, and the B.C. will know it's a plant."

"Why will he know?" Tawney asked, his eyes sadly demanding.

Tom wanted to say, Because you're obviously not the sort to touch a wretched girl like that; but he was afraid of awakening the intimacies of praise. He wanted nothing to do with this pitiful brouhaha. It was none of his business. "Oh, well, damn it," he said at last.

Tawney murmured, "Shall I let her go ahead?" With his finger he drew out some spilled beer-froth into a straight line. "I might." The line wavered, curved, and zigzagged back to the starting-point. "But what'd happen? They'd have to turn me over to the police, and I couldn't face that. Even if I got off, it would be too . . ." He rubbed the beer into a mess . . ." too filthy."

"But you can't let that old bitch blackmail you. If you went to the police about that, now, it would be sense."

"Her word against mine." Tawney rose and, with a certain majesty, went out. In a moment or so he returned with two slopping whiskies. "For the road."

"Whisky," Tom mumbled, and calculated mentally the amount of money his companion must have spent that evening. He drank; and in a moment, as if by a miracle, was pot-valiant. Feeling the golden flush in his veins, he leaned over and rapped Tawney's knee. "Know what? I'm going to put a stop to this. I'm going to tell that blackmail yarn to Felse, whether you like it or not. I'm going to, straight. You'll thank me for it. It's the only way."

Tawney took the rapping finger and dragged it down. His eyes were coal-bright, his lips set in fury. "You do, and I'll beat the daylights out of you, you bloody Judas."

Tom blushed, struggled for sobriety and good counsel.

"All right, all right. I take it back. I'll keep quiet, I swear. Won't say a word."

"I knew you wouldn't," Tawney sighed, meek, docile, the breastplate, the greaves and cuisses of his anger melting suddenly away. Between the young men there was a long silence. The black clock on the mantelshelf ticked time away, the gilded pendulum flashing behind a mist of maidenhair fern.

"Why don't you get to see Eily again and talk to her?" Tom suggested at last. Then, because he was a poet and sensitive, he said the saving phrase: "Best thing would be if you could get a woman to do it. A woman to talk to her."

Tawney blinked his eyes. His face brightened a little. "A woman?"

"Woman," Tom nodded, and through his mind there ran a string of little pictures, a bright fire, a pillow, a pair of boots, a red rose.

"Thanks. But which?"

"I don't know who you know." More pictures: a book with a green cover, a robin redbreast, a blue and soporific sea softly heaving beneath a sky all dabbled with little conical clouds.

"A woman," said Tawney drowsily. He arose.

"Going?"

"Have to think. Have to think by myself."

"Oh, but you must think here!" Tom was all courtesy. "I'll go. You stay here and think. Good luck, old boy."

"Good luck to you."

"I don't need it just now. *You* have the luck. You stay here and think."

"I'll stay here and think," said Tawney obediently, subsiding on to the sofa where he began to pull out tufts of wiry hair from a rip in the leather. "Think of a woman. Find the lady. Thanks; I feel better."

"Thanks for the beer. And the whisky."

"Must have another."

"No, thanks. Got to be going."

"You're all *right*, Berry," Tawney told him earnestly, and he closed his eyes.

Tom went quietly from the room, along the windy passage and into the street. The shock of cold and starry air awakened a memory.

Suddenly there was no news : and I . . .

That was it. Got it. He would go back to billets, get into bed and think out the whole, beautiful poem. T. H. Berry's *Suddenly . . .*, first published in *Vision*, 1943. The beginning of a new epoch in poetry.

Menhenheott, standing with friends before the fire in the bar, saw a solution to his problem. No specific thing had prompted it ; it had risen fully armed, even as he listened with half an ear to Alf Conway's tale of Batty Jouvet and little Pelletrini.

" So there we was, in the Kasbah," said the quartermaster, " where we shouldn't have been, none of us with passes, and hell on earth to come next morning. Batty was scared, as he always was, when Black Ali was around—funny about Batty, he'd do anything, go anywhere, pull off stunts that 'ud turn most men's hair grey, but he'd be shivering the whole time. I can't hardly ever remember Batty not shivering."

Menhenheott thought, I can't marry Maud ; not yet, anyhow. It's no good her saying she's got it all fixed up for Christmas, when I go home on leave, that we don't need to make a home during the war, that she can stay on with her ma. I can't do it yet. Not that I'll let her down ; I said I wouldn't, and I won't. I asked her to marry me, didn't I ?—when I wasn't drunk or crazy. So marry her I'm going to.

" . . . and just then we lost Pelletrini. Couldn't find him anywhere, and we funked looking. Didn't know what we might find when we found him. Black as pitch it was ; the lamps just lit the bit around them, and everything in between was like a coal hole. Black ! If you looked down the alleys it was like squinting down the neck of a stone jar. You listening, Menhenheott ? "

" Yes, Quarter."

" Ears on stalks ? " Conway demanded suspiciously, his grape-eyes protruding.

" Stalks," said the sergeant. He thought, Can't have Phyl. Not a hope, not in this life. Can't hurt Maud, because Maud's done nothing to me. The vision of Phyllis Ricks, brilliantly illumined upon a field black as the quartermaster's Algerian night, shook him with rage and longing. He saw quite clearly the flash of her brave, bold face as she turned her head, saw

the solid swing of her straight hair, the clear blue of her calm, ironic eyes, and he ached to fit his body to the length of her own. I should row with Phyl because she is so calm, so undisturbed, but I should love her just for that.

Mrs. Felse and her husband joined the group.

Alf Conway, stopping short in his tale, said, "To be continued in our next. Don't want to scare the ladies."

Mrs. Felse turned upon him her black, soft smile. "Not quite proper, Mr. Conway?"

"I'm always proper," he replied indignantly. "No, what I was telling was just horrible." He bought drinks for the Felses.

"Ned," said Mrs. Felse to her husband, "you've nearly got an eyebrow in your eye. Stand still—no, don't wriggle; stand still. If I don't get it out it'll only stick into you and hurt." With one hand she held him, with the other tweaked a long bristle from his brows. The room watched her, respectfully silent. Felse's lips moved. He twitched. He said, "That's all right, that's all right."

"No, it's not. Here's another one got too long." She gave him a fresh tweak, released him, and patted his shoulder. "Good boy."

Stepping back, he engaged in rapid and unusually friendly conversation with Penry Sturgess, who had just come in.

"Ned's eyebrows grow terribly thick," Mrs. Felse told Conway, "even when he was a baby they were like moustaches. I know, because I've seen pictures. Well, Mr. Menhenheott, how are you getting along these days? Winning the war for us?"

"Don't get much chance."

"I expect Stalingrad will fall, don't you?" she inquired earnestly of him, as one general seeking the opinion of another.

"Looks that way."

"Well, I expect it won't," said Conway. "No. I still think it won't. The Russians have a trick or two up their sleeves, they have."

"Well, they always were wily, weren't they? I mean, they got out of the last war."

"These are a different set of Russians," Conway grinned.

"Well," Mrs. Felse told him stoutly, "I'm glad I'm English . . . Ned!"

He turned away from Sturgess. " Yes ? "

" You're glad you're English, aren't you ? "

" Why shouldn't I be ? " he counter-questioned, glaring at her.

She gave him a little push. " You go back to your friends. Well, Mr. Menhenheott, when are we going to fight Hitler'? That's what I want to know."

At that moment Menhenheott thought, though he did not understand that the idea had, indeed, been prompted : I'll get a transfer to a unit going abroad.

Alf Conway put his hand on Mrs. Felse's arm, glanced cautiously about him and said, in a stage-whisper, " Monday week. S'th'truth. We're all going down to Brighton on lorries, with the guns, and hopping across to France at 23.59 hours. But don't you tell no one else."

She looked at first blank, then frightened, then angry. " But you shouldn't tell even——" She flushed and laughed " You're a kidder, you are ! I'd half-forgotten your little ways."

" There, you see ! See that, Menhenheott ? Nobody ever believes what I say."

The sergeant thought, If I go overseas I won't have to think what to do any more. I shan't have to marry Maud till I come back, and I shan't have to be driven silly every day by seeing Phyl. That's what I'll do.

He looked at the clock. " Closing time."

Immediately Mrs. Mills opened her mouth upon a glitter of gold: " Time's up. Time, gentlemen. Drink up now, we've lots of work to do when you've all gone."

" Ned," said Mrs. Felse, thrusting an arm behind her and, by pure instinct, fastening it upon her husband, " ten o'clock. See me home, will you ? "

The Lamb emptied, the Fleece emptied. The street was noisy with men, crowded with shouting shadows. A sound arose in the heart of the bunched hills, a wild, cold groaning, sourly musical.

" Lor' love us, it's Hitler ! " said a voice mildly wondering, and every one laughed, and looked at nothing in the starry sky.

" Long time since we heard from him," Conway said, " must be months."

"Oh, no," Felse protested, "there was a daylight one about a fortnight ago, lasted ten minutes."

"But nothing at night for months."

"End of August."

"Not on your life."

"Feel sure there was," Felse mused. His wife gripped his arm. "Well, don't hang around, Ned. I hate being out in it."

"Out in what?" asked Alf Conway.

"Oh, put a sock in it, Moaner!" someone shouted, and the siren, with instant obedience, drooled downwards into silence. Laughter rocked through the darkness.

"Listen," said Menhenheott.

The drumming sound of a distant plane, the lumbering drumming, heavy as a cow returning to the byre at milking-time, was heard far away over the hills.

Every one listened for a moment in interest, and then the crowds began to melt, the boots to sound along the resounding street.

"I don't like it, Ned," muttered Mrs. Felse, with a little grunt as she stubbed her toe on the kerb.

Menhenheott reassured her, "It's all right, only one of ours. We're a fighter area."

"Famous last words," said Conway, the grin sounding in his voice; and at that moment, grotesquely, comically, the bomb whined through the sky, the whine growing louder and louder in its funnel of wind.

Felse threw his wife down beneath a wall and lay on her, spread out like a tigerskin rug over her gasping body.

Menhenheott hopped into the doorway of the butcher's shop.

Alf Conway, laughing and swearing, dropped to the ground, propping himself on his elbows.

Tom Berry, dodging into a front garden, put his fingers in his ears.

Victor Tawney, the last to leave the Lamb, was the first to return there.

Clifford Toller turned back in to the George and shouted to Gillie something passionately unintelligible.

Bert Lilley slid off his bed and underneath it.

Elvorden and the Battery Commander prudently ducked beneath the ante-room table.

Tom Glaiden took his pipe out of his mouth, said " Good God," and did nothing at all.

Strutt and Cassilis, both lying on their beds reading, sprang like divers from the blankets to the linoleum.

The Battery Captain, returning from the M.T. park, was in the line of the blast when the bomb fell; was blown over the wall of the Baptist Chapel, his clothes ripped from his body, his collar-bone broken and the lobe chipped from his ear by a shard of broken glass.

Pickering said to himself, " Yes, I'm alive," and to make quite sure, repeated it. He moved gingerly, swore in agony, touched his right shoulder and swore again. Delicately he ran his fingers over his body, said " Lucky, lucky, only my shoulder," touched his face and put a sticky forefinger to his lips. " Blood somewhere." He was suddenly aware of the cold. Cold? God, I'm half naked. Moving his foot, he felt something roll beneath it. " That's my torch, if I can get at it." He tried to stretch for it, but the pain seized him and he lay back, panting and sweating. " All right. Try something else. Foot only. Dribble it up." Agonisingly, he nudged the torch into the crook of his knee and was able at last to grasp it in his right hand. He swallowed and spat. His mouth was filled with dust and grit. " Where now? "

The yellow beam fumbled in the darkness.

" God knows where I am. Hooray, hooray, I'm alive. Hooray! " shouted the Battery Captain, a little light-headed.

The thin, comforting note of the All Clear sounded through the gritty madhouse of the world.

" Hooray! " said Pickering, very loudly. He spat again, lay still. It would be silly if I fainted, because I'm all right if I lie perfectly quiet. Time passed, and he grew very cold and very, very vague concerning the day of the week, the month, the year.

" All right, sir," said a voice, Mangan's, " we've found you. Half a mo'." A great round shape of torchlight settled like a butterfly on Pickering's body. Mangan knelt and threw a coat over him. " All right, sir? "

" Collar-bone, I think. Cut myself somewhere, too. What did it hit? '

" Only the football field. Mucked that up proper. Silly lot of ——s, aren't they, sir, wasting one on us? "

Pickering agreed, and relapsed into vagueness. After a little while he found himself jolting along the street on a stretcher.

"You're in step," he complained, "Get out of it, will you?" The resultant jerk brought tears to his eyes.

"Sorry, sir," said Mangan sincerely.

The vibration of the bomb shivered the gas mantle and blew Eily Fogg into the dark. Trembling, sick, she began to cry for her mother.

Strutt and Cassilis, on all fours, looked at each other across the floor. Cassilis said, "Grr-r-r, I'm a bear." They both laughed and scrambled up.

Cameron-Leckie and Elvorden rose and resumed their seats.

"Close one," said Glaiden, replacing his pipe in his mouth.

The B.C. murmured, "Up on the hill somewhere. Near the M.T. park, I should think."

"We've lost some glass here, sir," said Elvorden. "Shall I have a look around?"

Butterfield, the mess servant, came in. He and the boy walked round the windows, cautiously poking their fingers behind the black-outs. "No, sir. Must be upstairs. There was an awful tinkle. Butterfield, will you do a tour of inspection?"

Upstairs, Bert Lilley lay on the bed, looking at a little cut in his wrist, through which the blood bubbled and spurted. Glass was strewn like diamonds over the floor, each bead catching and throwing off the light.

Lilley doubled up his arm, gripped it with his right hand. The flow, for a moment, was arrested. A line of blood rilled downwards, soaking into the sleeve of his pyjama-coat. Then he grew tired, cramped; he lay down on the bed and let his left arm hang over the side. The blood was like a little red spring.

Butterfield, knocking on the door, called out: "All right in there, sir?"

"All right."

"No windows gone?"

"One. But it's all right."

If I were ill they might be sorry for me. People are

sorry for you when you're ill, though I suppose if you were ill on execution morning they'd hang you just the same ; or would they put you in hospital, wait till you were well, and hang you then ?

Bertie, you've been stealing again and I shall ask your father to punish you.

But Mamma, I don't feel well. Mamma, I've got a pain and my throat feels sore. Mamma, it hurts here—here, as if I was burning. Mamma, I'm ill. I feel so awful.

Where, darling ? Show me. Open your mouth—no, wider. Under the light. Say 'Ah-ah——' Yes, it does look a little inflamed. . . . You must go to bed, Bertie, go at once, darling. Mamma will bring you a nice hot bottle.

Lilley remembered something else, too, a Roman who died, with open veins, in his path ; and the sorrow and beauty of this made him feel like crying. But I won't cry. I'll die. They'll be sorry then.

Bertie, Mamma has to spank you when you're naughty. It hurts her more than it does you.

You'll be sorry when I did. I feel ill, as if I'm going to die. Then you'll be sorry you hit me.

I'm going to die, to die, die. Nice and sleepy, dying. The bath turning shell-pink, turning rose, turning deep, dark, double-crimson. Dying.

" Oh, no, I'm not ! " Lilley mumbled in a wild panic, and leaped from the bed, arm upraised, fingers squeezing fiercely at the sliding flesh below the artery. He released it a second to unlatch the door, which he backheeled open, and he ran out into the passage, crying—" Butterfield ! Butterfield ! Come here ! I'm hurt ! "

Victory Tawney, sobered, inspected the Lamb, ground floor, first floor, front bedrooms and back, and reported no damage. He refused the offer of a drink, said good-night to Mrs. Mills and went out into the street. He saw Felse comforting his sobbing wife at the gate of her sister's home. He saw Gillie Eagles standing at the door of the Fleece, saw Sam kicking at a pile of broken glass.

I shall speak to Gillie to-morrow, because somewhere in her mind she is good.

I am glad I wasn't hurt. I wonder if I shall ever see the little dark girl again, Pickering's sister ? She was a nice,

sweet, gentle little girl. There is no need for me to get so frightened about Eily, because the world is not all filth and sorrow.

A truck took the Battery Captain to the Military Hospital at Grayling. It conveyed Lilley there also; but he, with wrist strapped, arm hung in a sling, was returned to Christenhurst an hour later.

Eily Fogg, whose mother had not heard her cries, wept herself, shivered herself, to sleep. She woke suddenly, thinking she heard the siren; even when she realised that the noise was only in her head, she heard it for several seconds longer. She was sweating with fright, shivering with loneliness. If only someone would come.

O God, I will not let Ma do this to Vic. I will tell the truth to-morrow. O God, help me.

She gave a little stifled shriek, shrank back against the wall. The curtain rustled, something fell to the floor. Climbed on to the bed. The blackness was like a prison, a prison in which things were sent crawling into the midnight cells to drive the prisoners mad. Her hand touched softness.

"Oh, Jessie, Jessie, you bad old Jessie!" She was laughing now, as well as crying, the tears streaming down her twitching face. She grabbed the tabby cat, Mrs. Piggot's old tabby, into her arms and lay with the purring warmth against her heart, comforted, comforted. A friend. An angel. If only I could be Jessie and Jessie me. I will pretend that I am Jessie, sewn in fur, purring as I breathe.

Purring.

Gillie Eagles, sleepless, tiptoed into her husband's room and watched him as he slept, his darkness outlined upon a lesser dark, his breathing like the purring of a great cat. She sat down on the edge of his bed, touched his shoulder. He did not stir.

All right, Sam, sleep now; but you shall talk to-morrow. What's up this time? Decided you're never going to speak to me again? Not a word, not even after the bomb. Think you're cheating me, don't you? That I don't know how you've bottled love inside you and screwed it down tight. But I do now. I'm more powerful than you are, see? Because I know what you don't know I know; that you love me.

Yes, you sleep. That's right, sleep your head off. You didn't even care if I was upset, did you? Not a kind word, not one. Not any sort of word. Just slopped out a brandy into somebody's used glass and shoved it at me. Do you think I've got nerves of iron? I'm frightened of bombs. Poor, poor Gillie, frightened of bombs. Of all loud noises, a car backfiring, even a pistol-shot on the stage. Whenever I see a man coming on to the stage with a gun I stuff my fingers in my ears until he's let it off. I have to. If any one held my hands down and made me wait for it I should scream.

All right, Sambo, you asked for it. I will leave you. I will marry Toller. He thought of me, didn't he? He turned back and yelled—"Get down, Gillie!" I suppose that upset you, too?

In need of comfort she lay down on the bed, outside the clothes. He grunted, moved restlessly, began suddenly to snore. In a little while she began to feel the cold. She returned to her own room, found the water-bottle still fairly warm and slid it under her nightdress, next to the skin. Almost at once she fell asleep.

Cameron-Leckie, the last to stay up, heard the midnight news.

"At Stalingrad, the Russians continue to hold their ground against the new German attack. Fighting in the factory district has been fiercer during the past twenty-four hours." He switched off the wireless, rose, yawned. What a war. But we shall win it all right. Glad the bomb didn't fall here. How I should hate to die now, just at this time, to die without seeing the end!

CHAPTER TEN

TUESDAY

THE weather was suddenly mild, the sky moistened by unseasonable perfume. Over the weald the honeyed sun lay gentle and warm, disguising the iron of coming winter, and a ruddy light, phenomenal, peculiar to none of the year's quarterings, sank its lances through the aromatic

pines. At the gun park on the hill, Strutt, straddling a fallen tree, his mackintosh spread to his sides like a cavalry overcoat, felt the delight of content that resembles weariness, for true contentment must ever be preceded by disturbance of some sort or another. In his pocket was a telegram from Stacey to tell him that the doctor was not quite sure, but almost ; and that there must be a test of some sort before any one could confidently rejoice. Strutt fancied the test was in some way connected with rabbits, though he could remember no particulars. Almost sure, yes ; and Kerrigan is a cautious man. Perhaps, after all, it would not be too daring to rejoice a little in advance. Every one must be happy to-day, because it is that kind of weather.

He looked at the knot of men about the nearest gun. Tawney was rubbing it down with oily rags and a mixture of oil and paraffin. His face was absorbed, dark as a Greek's. Is he happy ? Menhenheott was showing Lucas, the youngest and most inept member of the troop, how to dismantle the breech mechanism. The sun touched his hair, commuting it to metal. Is Menhenheott happy ? He's been a bit sour to-day. Must talk to him, see what's up—if anything's up. Put it right. Put the world right.

Lucas handled the actuating shaft, stared nervously at it as if, like the holy rod, it might flower in his hands.

"Get the idea ?" Menhenheott asked.

"Yes, Sarge."

"Sure ?"

"I think so."

Bates, the artificer, a little quick man with canine eyes, came over the grass and stood by Strutt. "Nice bomb we had last night, sir."

"I'll say we did. It's mucked up the football field and knocked out half the village windows. Five hundred pounder, they think."

"Lucky no one got hurt. Except Captain Pickering, I mean."

"Damn lucky the thing went into soft earth, otherwise we might have had a worse mess than we did. Mr. Lilley got cut by glass, but nothing serious."

Bates looked out over the weald. He murmured, "I hear Mr. Lilley went up to R.H.Q. this morning."

"That's so."

"I thought he was looking bad." This was not in reference to the bombing.

"Who wouldn't?" said Strutt frankly. "Bad business."

"Bad. Yes." Bates spoke as if in church, as though he feared to disturb the devotions of others. His eyes were mournful.

"Brasso," Mangan shouted, "who's got the Brasso? Chuck it over, Fred!" He threw up his arm, caught the tin as it spun glittering through the air. "Ta very much." He began to sing, in a bumbling bass, *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*, broke off to swear at Lucas. "What the hell do you think you're doing, playing Hunt the bloody Thimble? Here. Come here. I'll show you."

"I'll do the showing," said Portman, the Number One in charge of the gun. "Here, Lucas, you watch me. We're going to clean the grease nipples and the brass parts now."

Mangan hung an oil-rag like a yashmak over the lower part of his face and shook his hips.

The artificer said, "I must say you keep your guns pretty nice, Mr. Strutt. Not like some I see."

Strutt was amply pleased, confirmed in his opinion that the day was a happy one. "Got a good supply of rags, anyhow; my wife sends them. They used to be our bedroom curtains."

Bates remarked that it was very nice to have a wife. "Who's doing the B.K.'s work while he's in dock, sir?"

"Mr. Glaiden."

"Oh. Ah."

Catching the shadowy inference, Strutt said shortly, "He knows his job. He ought to have had his third pip by now."

"Ah," Bates replied, non-committal. He strolled over to inspect the guns.

Finding Menhenheott near, Strutt spoke to him. He liked and admired the sergeant as, indeed, he liked and admired most of the men, and he believed that his liking was returned. Between an officer and the lads, he thought, there are two ways of liking; the kind that is founded on faith and the kind that is no more than the fondness of a master for foxhounds. Good men! Brave men! Trust!—Paid for. Queer fellows, queer ways; but follow you to hell, you understand. Sergeant Rover, Bombardiers Towser and Spot, the faithful, the velvet-eyed.

Strutt thought, Glaiden would notice if a man were a good soldier and praise him. He would never notice if that man were in some private trouble. All the same, it's irritating, on a day like this, to have the Troop Sergeant looking like a mute at a funeral. No right to do it. "Anything up?"

Menhenheott flushed. Like most red-headed people he coloured easily, the blood steadily rising beneath the blond transparency of his skin. "Well, sir, yes. I've been wanting to tell you. I've applied for posting to a unit going overseas."

Strutt stared. "Well, God starve the crows! Why? Why the hell?" He was angry. Good Troop Sergeants were not so plentiful.

Menhenheott replied, as if repeating a lesson, "I feel I'd be doing more useful work for the army abroad than I am at present."

Sunlight struck the distant spires, sending arrows of white light across the sky.

"Yes, yes, I know. That's what you wrote to the B.C. What's the real reason? Come on, tell me. You'll have to tell the Major, anyhow, because he won't swallow your first story."

Menhenheott was silent.

"All right, Sergeant. Forget it. It's none of my business."

"It's not that, sir. I do want to, only it sounds daft."

"Can't be so daft, if it's driving you to those lengths. Are you really so crazy to see action?"

"Well, in a way I'd like to; when it comes. It's not so good hanging around here. Anyway, my brother got killed in Norway, so I wouldn't mind having a slap at them for him."

Strutt, assuming that he was to be told nothing more, said, "Yes, I'd feel the same," and rising from the log, moved away. He had a sense of humiliation, of failure. You think you've got their confidence, and find you've got damn all.

Menhenheott followed him He murmured rapidly, "It's because of my young lady," then looked so confused that Strutt pretended not to have understood him.

"Sorry, Sergeant, didn't catch. What did you say?"

Someone called out, "Hi, Sarge, the Tiffy says number three gun ought to be pulled back."

"All right, I'm coming." He added to Strutt, "I'll tell you later, sir. I want to."

This was a relief, to find confidence still alive, the day unspoiled. Lilley gone, and the mess cleared of his misery; Stacey to have a baby. A girl, Strutt thought, I'd like a girl, dark for choice. Pity you can't fill in an indent form: one girl, dark, my nose, Stacey's eyes, Stacey's hair, my chin, my fingernails, Stacey's ears, height about twenty inches odd rising to five foot four. He spoke to Tawney, who was for the moment standing idle. "Bit of a shock last night, wasn't it?"

"It was, sir. Seems an outrage, when you've got out of the bomb-habit. I inspected the Lamb for Mrs. Mills, but there were no windows lost there. She was terribly upset."

Tawney, concerned, courteous, lifeless. Someone else spoiling the day. What's the matter with *him*? Strutt was seized with irritation. Damn rank, damn discipline. I like Tawney. In civvy street we'd be friends; he and Cass, much the same type, only Cass tries to be a soldier and Tawney lets everything go. Down here, I can't have a drink with him without a Sir standing between us like the sword in the bed. "I'll bet she was. She's a nervy sort of woman." He laughed. "Mrs. Eagles didn't turn a red hair, I'm told." Oh, devil take it, he's in love with Gillie and I've made him look at his boots. "Mr. Cassilis and I were in our beds, so we just rolled neatly underneath them."

Tawney replied, "Mrs. Eagles isn't conspicuously neurasthenic," and smiled faintly.

Strutt said, "I believe Mrs. Mills lost a brother and a son in France. I don't suppose that helps. She always looks cheerful enough, not to say rowdy; but it's so often the cheerful ones who break first."

He was suddenly conscious that the day's promise was false, the glaze of happiness illusory. How much longer of this? How much longer before Stacey and I are together again, sharing a bed, talking to each other in the dark of all the day's happenings, of the guests who left an hour ago? Nostalgia caught him as he remembered their life together, incidents strung together like beads on a wire, each one a coloured picture in the back of his head. Coming home from work, kissing her, taking her out to the Roebuck across the way, returning to a pleasant, slapdash meal and after-

wards, in the small and angular kitchen, helping her to wash up. Sitting on the couch at her side, explaining his work to her that he might, by this means, fix it in his own memory. An enormous help. (Without Stacey I should never have got through my exams first shot. She used to say that by the time we were through she knew more than I did; and I'm not so sure she wasn't right.) Then, in the dull blue evenings of a London summer, walking along the river in the luminous dust of the plane-trees, or through the shining streets, of the West End where the lamps swelled like apricot moons against the twilight. Her body moving with his, the delicate edge of bloom outlining the round curve of her cheek. How long before this comes again, before the ache is stilled, and the senses of delight awaken? Time wasted, the years of love run dry. Oh yes, there's no option, there's no alternative; but the fact that there is none makes the fact of waste, of loss, no more tolerable. He added, "We'll all feel better when something starts."

"God help us," Tawney murmured, "don't I wish it would!"

There was, in his voice, such quiet, clippered violence that Strutt spoke automatically.

"Something wrong?"

A pause. "Not more than usual, sir."

To break a silence: "You can't say we don't have our excitements here, all things considered."

"Bombs?"

"And other things."

"Yes. Oh, yes. Never a dull moment." Tawney hesitated. Then—"Excuse me, sir, I ought to be doing some work." He ran down the glowing slope of grass.

Afterwards, on the way back to the village, Menhenheott joined Strutt. Without ceremony and out of a shamed desire for help, he broke into his story, telling it swiftly, in a voice of despair. "I got engaged to a young lady in Putney, just before war broke out. Met her at a dance. It was the only one she'd been to for a year, because her mother was a bit of an invalid and didn't like to be left alone much. She was very pretty—my young lady, I mean—and sort of miserable because she had such a life of it at home. She didn't want us to get married at once, which I would've, because her Ma couldn't bear to have her go, so we thought

we'd wait till after the war. Well, I came down here and didn't see my young lady for three months—the longest time I'd been away from her. Somehow I started not seeing her properly—not remembering quite what she looked like, if you know what I mean. Then her letters started to get on my nerves. She always did sort of lean on me, sort of cling. Oh, I know ; it sounds pretty lousy ; but that's how it was. You can't change how things are. Then I met somebody else. Somebody in Christenhurst." For a moment he was silent. Before them both rose the ghost of the living Phyllis Ricks, a broad-shouldered phantom with cool, demanding eyes. He continued, " Maud wants me to marry her now, and it's now that I feel I can't. It's the other girl I want."

" Well, then," said Strutt, " have her. Break it off with your young lady."

" I can't. She has a rotten life ; and she's never done me harm. I've no blind reason for hurting her."

" If you do marry her, you'll only make her life hell."

Menhenheott's face set in an expression of stubborn nobility at once ludicrous and touching. " No, I won't. I'll make it what she wants it to be, only . . . well, not yet. I can't do it yet. I've got to get used to the idea again."

" So you want to get abroad ? "

" Yes, sir."

" To get away from both of them ? "

" Both of them. Yes."

" Look, Sergeant, I think you're all wrong about this.—And by the way, don't count on having your application accepted, because the B.C. isn't going to like it one bit."

" I'm not counting, sir."

Strutt said earnestly, " If I were you, I'd write to the young lady and tell her just how things are. Or if that seems to you a dirty trick, tell her yourself when you go on leave. Aren't you due for some soon ? "

" I can't do it to her."

" Thousands would."

" I wouldn't."

" You'll only lead her a dog's life, whatever you may think."

" Not if I make up my mind, I won't."

Strutt shrugged. "It's your pigeon. Good luck, whatever you do, but I'm not liking the idea of losing you." He went back to the mess, and there he found Cameron-Leckie, companionable with rage.

"Did you know about this, Strutt? That your troop sergeant wants to go overseas?"

"I've just heard. This afternoon."

"Well, do you know why? He gave me the usual cock-and-bull excuse."

Strutt hesitated; decided that it was Menhenheott's business to tell his own story. "No, sir, not really. I fancy it's some trouble at home. It generally is."

"Damn the man! Has he any idea of the work this is going to entail for me, or doesn't he care? I'm damned if I'm going to support him." The B.C.'s eyes were baffled, half-affectionate. "A good man like that, too. The wee bastard," he added, reverting to the doric of ancestors separated from him by two generations of Bradford, and he smiled to see Strutt's fleeting look of surprise at this concession of intimacy. "Is he really keen to go?"

"Very keen, sir, I should say."

"Now come, you must know something. Between ourselves. What's the bee in his bonnet?"

Strutt replied reluctantly, "Trouble with his fiancée, I think."

"Trouble? What sort? Not trying to skip the country in order to shirk his obligations?" There was, in this remark, the indignation of dark Presbyters long years asleep beneath the crust of the Highlands.

"I shouldn't say that. But he'll tell you more, sir, I expect."

"He'll have to, if he wants his application forwarded."

Elvorden, sweaty and tired, passed the door. He had been out running with his men.

"Had a good day?" the B.C. called to him.

"All right, sir. Decent weather." He went on upstairs.

"And what's the matter with him?" The B.C. was spirited. "With every one?"

"He was upset about Lilley."

"So were you, I expect. So was I. Why Elvorden in particular? Why should he play Mrs. Gummidge? We all suffered, but no one suffered more than Elvorden, eh?"

"He's young." Strutt was necessarily evasive. "He takes things hard."

Cameron-Leckie, though plainly dissatisfied, said no more upon the subject. Instead, he mentioned that he had been to Grayling to see the Battery Captain, that the latter was mending nicely and that his sister, who had come down to visit him, was staying at the Fleece.

"The little girl?" Strutt smiled.

"She's a tall girl," the Major protested.

"Yes, I suppose she is. I meant young. Eighteenish."

Cameron-Leckie's dead eye glowed faintly, a spark kindled by an inadequate dynamo. "Very pretty," he remarked.

"I hope I'll see her to-night. She and my wife got on very well over the week-end."

"Yes, that's right, see her. Look after her. No place for young girls, a pub. I hope they give her somewhere to sit."

"Sit?"

"She can't sit alone in the bar," said the Major, shocked.

"Oh, I see. Oh, no. How long's she here for, sir?"

"Just over night."

"How long are you here for?" asked Tawney, uneasy, startled by this sudden encounter in the flowering dusk, between lights.

He had been on his way to Yew Cottage when she had stepped out of nowhere, saying, in a voice both shy and bold, "Hallo, Mr. Tawney." Now he looked down upon her, yet not so far down, for she was tall, and he remembered the name he had heard her brother speak. Charmian. "Kind Charmian . . ." A beautiful, absurd name for so very young a girl. So far away from Gillie, who was old in experience, from Eily, old in distress. He thought of Eily and sickened. She is between you and me, Charmian, a smear that makes it evil for me to speak to you. Supposing the worst happens, and you read in the newspapers of my disgrace, and then remember that you spoke and were kind to me? You came just at the moment when my thoughts were most ugly, when I realised that it was Chris who went with Eily that night into the wood, and for many nights was away from the rest of us, returning without explanation.

She answered, "Just over night. I came down to see my brother, of course."

A group of men passing by nodded towards the man and the young girl, nudged one another and murmured.

"It was rotten luck for him," Tawney commented, his eyes seeking escape. "I hope he'll be about again soon. If you'll excuse me, Miss Pickering——"

She said straightly, "Shouldn't I be talking to you? Isn't it 'done,' or something of the sort?"

"Oh, please don't think that. I'm sorry. I——"

"I'm afraid I am pestering soldiers," said Charmian quaintly, and her mouth twitched. She lowered her head, so that the light touched the crests of her plump cheeks and gleamed upon her eyelids. For a moment the man and girl were equal, were free, as in civilian life, to discover each other by what means they chose, and the war was no more than a masquerade, a charivari, to give young people the pleasant illusion that they were strangers. "I'm sorry." She added, with a touch of childish queenliness that in his worry and confusion he found infuriating, "I'd like to have lunch with you one day, even before you're a General." She searched his face to see if he were remembering his words at the dance, and on finding no light in him continued, with failing confidence, "Perhaps when you're on leave. But it's as you like."

He said stiffly, "Thank you. I'll remember. I'm afraid I've really got to go now, if you'll excuse me. I——"

"I've done something wrong, I know," she interrupted, "but I don't know what it is, and I honestly don't care very much. Good-night." She left him abruptly, and he saw the light gape out for a second from the door of the Fleece.

Oh God, oh God, said Tawney to himself, I'm going mad. I wish I were in hospital like Pickering, hidden away where no one could get at me and send my temperature up.

He waited for a moment in shadow to see that the coast was clear, then passed swiftly through the gate of Yew Cottage and tugged the greasy string. Mrs. Fogg admitted him, showing him with tipsy courtesy into the nightmare room. "Well, come to your senses?"

Taking a note from his breast pocket, he gave it her. "Here."

"What's this for, to buy me a Rolls Royce? You'll have to do better than that, won't you?" She smiled down at her thin breast, fingered a shamrock brooch that held

together two lappets of ragged lace. "Oh, I really do think you will, honest I do."

He said, "Look, we'll arrange things to-morrow. To-morrow night, I promise you. The pound's till then." He felt towards her a strange intimacy, as if he and she had, in this repellent transaction, found some common meeting ground.

Mrs. Fogg clicked her tongue against her teeth. Her eyes were wary. "Why? Do you think you'll slide out of it? What's to stop me telling your officer to-night?"

He snatched the note from her fingers. "Then you get nothing."

She nipped it back. "All right. But to-morrow's your last chance."

Eily came in, saw Tawney and flinched away from him. He smiled at her. "I'm starting to pay up, Eily. Isn't that nice?"

She wept.

"What are you crying about? Aren't you pleased?"

"Ma, don't do it. Let him go away. I don't want him here."

"You hold your tongue, will you?"

"I don't want him here." She turned to the wall, laid her head upon her folded arms. The hair slithered in thin blond lacings over her cheek.

Mrs. Fogg gave a hideous imitation of a child crying. "Diddums diddums den, Mamma make it well? Dadda sing Baby Bunting?" She became a fury. "See, Mr. Tawney? See what you've done?" Her eyes protruded, her cheeks smoked with the heat of her rage. "If you think I'll ever forgive you for what you've done to my girl, you carneying swine, you——"

Appalled, he saw in her the incarnation of everything disgusting, of rotting food rank in its own grease, of a slime of vomit on a kerbstone, of beds foully enseamed, of hopelessness penned in a small room, for ever breathing in its own faint air, of death in filth and darkness. He escaped past her, into the street. Get a woman to talk to Eily. Get hold of Gillie somehow. Get hold of Gillie; but how?

As by a miracle she was there, walking poker-backed a little ahead of him, her arms full of flowers. Moving rapidly along the village street, she climbed the steps that led to

All Saints, and he remembered that sometimes she would decorate the church for a christening or a marriage.

He followed her. She was stuffing the nipped rosebuds into the guttering about the font, working by the light of a torch that she had poised on top of a collecting box. Hearing his step on the stones she straightened herself, called out, "That you, Mr. Tenby?"

"No. It's me, Vic."

She made a sound of fury. "What the devil are you doing, chasing me up here? The Vicar may come in and find you."

"'She went to the Vicar's
And took off her knickers
And said I do that 'cause I'm hot in 'em,'"

he quoted, light-headed with relief of having found her. "What are you doing here, come to that, at this time in the evening?"

"The Chillick baby's being christened to-morrow. I told old Tenby I'd do the font and then forgot every damn thing about it till half an hour ago. I can't do it to-morrow because I'm going to Strethamfold early. And now that you know, I wish you'd go away."

Her hands, moving in the double circle of torchlight, were tiny, deft and white.

"I haven't come up here to make love to you," Tawney told her.

"I should think not, in church!" Her voice held a primitive indignation.

He laughed. "You are funny, Gillie."

"I don't see how. Oh, do go away, will you? You're making me nervous."

"Would you do something good because you were in church?"

Some change in his voice caught her attention. The disembodied hands, poised among roses, were still. "What's up?"

He leaned against the back pews. "I'm in trouble, Gillie. Most beastly trouble. You might help."

"What sort?" She was sharp with apprehension.

Quietly, he told her. Gillie, her work done, switched off

the torch. They were in the dark, for the moon had not yet risen.

She said, "You're a fool. Tell the old hag to choke herself."

"I daren't. She can break hell loose."

"But if you've done nothing, why are you so scared? I can't understand you. You didn't touch Eily, did you?"

It was several moments before he replied. The church smelled of coldness and damp, of mice and rotting wood. He could just distinguish the dark of her head against the lesser dark of the long window, the shape of a bomb pointing skywards. "Yes," he said slowly, "you would ask me that. I suppose I love you, Gillie, but the moment you put that question I knew I should one day get over it. No, Mrs. E., I am innocent."

She retorted angrily, "Then why not go to the B.C. yourself?"

"Because . . . I suppose because I'm afraid of the business seeing daylight. If she accuses me they've no option but to hand me over to the police for a trial."

"You are a weak thing," she said.

"I'm afraid so. Oh, Gillie, do help me!"

"What on earth can I do?"

"Talk to Eily. She might listen to you. Get her to tell the truth."

"Do you know what the truth is, then? Who the man could be?"

He hesitated. After a second—"No. Not the slightest idea."

He heard the restless movement of her body. "I can't do it. I've never spoken to the brat before in my life. Anyway, it can't be to-morrow."

"Will you be away the whole of the day?"

"Probably."

"She leaves the Geogehans at half-past four. Waylay her for me."

"You're a fool, Vic. I won't do it. I never heard anything so damn silly."

Coming to her side, he put his arm about her and drew her down into a pew. "Listen to me. Gillie, if you do this I'll never bother you again. I'll do anything for you in return; if there's anything you need, that you've been

hankering for, I'll give it you. But I believe you're good, that you can do good for its own sake. Do good for me."

She repeated, "You're a fool."

"I know. It's the fools who need helping."

"It wouldn't be any use."

"Perhaps not. But you'll try it?"

"I'd only make a fool of myself."

"To a child? Would you feel it so much if you did?"

She was silent.

"What do you need that I can give you?"

She replied roughly, "I don't want anything for it. You can have your tomfoolery free."

He took her arm, kissed the wrist an inch above a remembered mole. "Thank you."

Gillie said, "I'm sorry, Vic. I can see it's rotten for you."

"Bless you."

"You're a handsome boy. Know that? Have lots of girls told you so? I wonder what makes you such a flop?"

They were both whispering, their voices soft in the dark as the brushing of trees across a rooftop.

"I wonder," said Tawney.

Footsteps rang on the stones of the porch. Gillie rose, tiptoed rapidly back to the font and switched on the torch. Tawney slipped into the dark of the wall, edged along it till he reached the west door and stepped out into the churchyard. He heard Gillie crying, in her prettiest, most docile voice, "Oh, Vicar, I so nearly forgot your flowers!"

When she had talked with him she left the church and, instead of turning back towards Christenhurst, went quickly up the hill. The stars were alight now and the yews, even in their massy shadow, retained some quality of greenness. The air was sweet with the smell of mashed wet leaves, of earth disturbed by the autumn ploughing. Why had she agreed to meet Elvorden she did not know, unless she had been stirred to acceptance by his audacity in telephoning from the Post Office to the Fleece, just before one o'clock. Supposing Sam had answered? Or perhaps the conflicts of the two preceding days, the sense of her own power and beauty so driven to frustration by Sam's snoring, had made her eager to expend what remained of a mood in some new excitement. Anyway, he's an attractive boy and I'm doing

no harm. A feather in my cap; they say his father has a title. I wonder what sort? The sort that is handed down? It would be funny—she laughed to herself at the entwining fantasy—if I married *him*, if I became Lady Elvorden. Funnier things do happen, they happen every day. But I'm too old, older than Ives by seven, eight, nine years.

He was waiting for her at the two pine trees that marked the forking of the lane. "I knew you'd come."

"Did you?" Gillie laughed. "And after I said I wouldn't, too. Did you read it in the stars?"

He said, arrogant in his youth, "Don't waste time," and pulled her against him.

Setting her hands to his breast, she pushed him away. "Now, now, now, is that any way to behave? I thought you were well brought up." She could just make out, in the light of the rising moon, the careful beauty of his profile, which might have been modelled roughly in wax and then smoothed down by a delicate finger. "What's the matter, Ives?"

"I love you. I'd mad about you."

She said nothing.

"I suppose that's nothing new to you, is it? Not after Toller, and Glaiden, and Lilley, and that lazy yoick Tawney. Why you had to pick on Tawney . . .".

She moved to leave him.

"Don't go. Please don't."

"Why the devil should I stay to be insulted? Lilley! Glaiden! Don't be ridiculous. And I was never interested in Tawney."

He murmured distressfully, "I'm sorry, Gillie. I'm behaving like a cad, I know, but only because I feel so rotten."

"Why? Lost your Meccano, or something?" She was sharp with him, the desire for excitement dying in her. She was going to let no pretty young snob pull her about like that, treat her as if she were nobody.

"The others despise me." He might have been thirteen years old, scorned by the third form.

"What for?"

"I meant to tell the B.C. about Lilley. I saw the thing happen. I knew it was the right thing to do, but Strutt and Glaiden thought I was a Judas."

She said, puzzled, " But it was Felse who told him."

" I know, but I meant to. Everybody knows I would have told if Felse hadn't got in first." He put his arms around her, set the cold freshness of his cheek to hers. " I love you. I'm mad about you."

She wriggled. " Let me go, and don't be a young fool. No one's even bothering to despise you. What they're really doing is to try and put the whole nasty business out of their minds. Now you can work it out for yourself, and perhaps if you try hard enough you'll manage to grow up."

He said frantically, " Don't go. Make a fool of me, if you like, but don't go. Listen, I'm due for leave in a fortnight's time. Haven't you some excuse for getting away from here, some friend you could say you were visiting ? Sam wouldn't think anything, because he wouldn't know about us."

" There's nothing for Sam to know ! "

" Quiet. Quiet, Gillie. Listen to me. We could have a day or two in London—dance wherever you liked, see a show. You need some life, don't you ? You're going crazy here. I'd ask nothing for it, I swear I wouldn't. Not if you didn't want to."

" Ask nothing for what ? For the dancing, the show ? "

He mumbled unhappily, " I didn't quite mean that."

" There was nothing else you could have meant."

" Please come. I need you so. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and you're buried in this damned graveyard of a village. I don't know how to put things, quite . . . but I—you—I love you so much it's tearing me in pieces."

Gillie sighed and, reaching up, kissed his mouth, which had the resiliency and warmth of a hot-water bottle and excited her as much. " Come on. We'll walk together as far as the church and then you'll have to let me go on ahead."

" But what do you say ? "

" Nothing. It's childish to think I can get away from here. Except for a night or two with Sam's sister at Strethamfold I haven't been out of the Fleece for two years. Besides, you don't really love me. You're miserable and fed up, and you want someone to hold your hand and say every one else is cruel to you. I know."

He fell into step at her side, and upon this token of defeat she was sorry for him. " Haven't you a girl of your own ? "

He was glum. "Only the sort you meet at a dance and take out to lunch once or twice. Nothing serious."

She asked curiously, "Where do you take her?"—for a moment, in a desire for vicarious pleasure, as childish as he.

"Oh, I don't know. All sorts of places. Savoy. Berkeley Grill. Wherever there is to eat."

She laughed. "And that was before the five-bob limit, too!" What a fool I am, not to let him love me, if he wants to. Thinking of the things he could give her, she was warm with greed. "I've always wanted to go to the Ivy, where you see the actors. Is it nice?"

"I don't know. I've never been there."

They came to the row of yew trees. The tower of All Saints leaned back in the arms of the supporting stars, erasing the moon. The stones in the churchyard were flooded with a faint violet light that gave them, in appearance, the crumbling transparency of loaf-sugar, and the pillar topped with a hand pointing heavenwards, which was set above the graves of the Piggot family, was fleshly pale.

"Got to run now," said Gillie, her voice changed, muted, by the spring of avarice that had spouted up beneath her good intentions. "You're a nice boy. Kiss me."

He bent down, bringing the warmth of his face, of his breath, near to her waiting mouth. His lips touched hers were soft and a little moist. With one hand he held her; let the other hand lie, lightly as a corselet, upon her breast. Feeling the power in him, the heat of love and frustration, she drew away. "Maybe one day we'll go out together," said Gillie.

"When?" The moonlight cast maturing shadows on his face, forecasting the selfish desire that the years would stamp upon it.

"I don't know. This year, next year, sometime. Not never. Ives—if you let Sam guess a *thing*, I'll . . ." She could frame no suitable threat.

"I'll pretend I don't give a damn about you," said young Elvorden, exultant as a child who plans a trick upon his parents, "I'll pretend I can't stand you, if you like. Wait till to-night! You'll see. Darling. Darling."

"Don't go overdoing it," she warned him sharply. "Just be polite and show no particular interest. Behave as you always have done."

"I think," he said, believing his own words, "that I've always loved you. From the first time I set eyes on you. I've been trying so hard to fight it."

What a little liar you are, she thought, much amused. And how the pictures affect men; from Ives down to the sanitary orderly, they all talk Hollywood when love becomes tricky and original words are hard to find. She touched his face—"Good-bye for now"—and went very quickly back towards the village.

When she entered the Fleece it was twenty past seven. The bar was not full, as it was dinner hour in the mess. Glaiden and Cassilis were on the point of leaving. She noticed that the former was looking excited and cheerful, heard Cassilis say to him, "Well, I'm glad you're enjoying yourself. It's more than I should." They hailed her. "Hullo, Mrs. Sam."

"Hullo."

"Been on the loose?" Glaiden asked her.

Sam, behind the bar, rang up the cash register.

Stripping off her coat and scarf, she hung them over her arm.

"I've been up at the church, fixing the font for a christening. Going, Tom? Have one on the house first. You too, Mr. Cassilis."

"Thanks," said Glaiden, "but we must be pushing. Besides, I've already had half my quota for to-day."

"Quota?"

"One pint. In two lingering halves."

She raised her eyebrows, fanned out her hands, threw at Cassilis a glance of comical inquiry.

"An' is it the dear's truth he's tellin'?"

"Your Irish is rotten, Mrs. Sam. Yes, it's the dear's truth. He's acting B.K. now; didn't you know?"

"Congretu*leet*ions," she said, exaggerating refinement. "That better than Irish?—Congratulations, Tom. Is it like hard work?"

"Very like, thank you."

"He thrives on it. Well, we'll see you again later. Oh, hullo! Here's Miss Pickering."

Charmian had come in from the street. She smiled at Gillie and the men, was introduced by Cassilis to Glaiden, whom she knew only by sight.

"How's the B.K.?" Cassilis asked her. "Have you just been up to Grayling?"

"Not just this moment; I've been out for a walk. But I was up there earlier this evening. He's doing splendidly, thank you. He's lying there in perfect comfort, reading himself sick." She laughed. Glaiden offered her a drink which she declined, saying that she was just going to have a meal.

"Oh, Lord," Gillie murmured, "I do hope Lucy's remembered. You'll think we're the backwoods here, Miss Pickering; we're so unused to having people during the week that we forget they have to eat."

"Anything will do," said Charmian looking, nevertheless, slightly alarmed.

Gillie in the rôle of hostess, became bluff, assumed the spiritual disguise of a comfortable woman of motherly disposition. "Anything won't! I'll go and see to it right away, and let you know the moment it's ready."

When she had gone Cassilis said, "I bet I know what he's reading. A large, expensive book of Art, with thirty-two plates."

"He's reading Friedländer's *Art and Connoisseurship*, as a matter of fact," Charmian replied, nodding, "and explaining to the man in the next bed, who wants to read his own newspaper, why he ought to like Flemish primitives."

"You're going up to-morrow, of course? Would you like to take him a book of mine? It's the first volume of Proust. He said he'd like to read it, but would have to wait till he found time."

"Send him a decent thriller," Glaiden scoffed, "he doesn't want your highbrow muck."

"Well, he's got time now," she answered, "so he'll be delighted. Will you be in here to-night, Mr. Cassilis? I could collect it from you then."

"I will. Oh, and Strutt asked me to convey his regards and to say that he'd be in this evening, as well. He thought he'd be able to run in before dinner, but the B.C. kept him for something or other."

"Give him my regards also," said Charmian, with pleasing maturity. "Well, I suppose I'd better wash my hands and be ready for whatever food Mrs. Eagles finds me."

"A bit of faded beef and a pickled walnut," Glaiden sug-

gested, "with a nice slice of the day-before-yesterday's tart to follow. I know. My sister came down here once."

"Oh, don't! I'm so cold, and I'm rather tired, too. I'll see you both again later?"

"Perhaps not me," said Glaiden, "or at any rate, not till just before closing-time. I'm trying to catch up on your brother's work."

As he left the Fleece with Cassilis he said, "Nice little girl."

"Nervous and confident all at once. She's a lovely piece, isn't she?"

"Been thrown over by her young man recently, too. Silly young swine. What more does he want?"

"Has she? Who told you?"

Glaiden smiled, as if something pleased him. "B.K."

"He did? What, Blanco offering a confidence?"

"He does tell me things now and then. You know"—Glaiden paused before replying to light a cigarette—"you know, I think he does it to buck me up. Oh, I'm not such a fool. He thinks that if someone has confidence in me, I might find some in myself. Yes, he has psychological ideas, has old Claud, but I like him even when I see right through him to the other side."

Cassilis considered what he had been told. Yes, all the time, every day, one finds out new things about men whose interest, so far as discoveries go, had seemed exhausted.

Glaiden continued, "I'm the only one here, except Sadness, who ever calls him Claud. Silly sort of name, I always thought, but not on him. He's all right, you know. Hope I can keep his work going as he wants it."

Yet another discovery; the discovery of hero-worship in adult dress, the unsuspected respect of one man for another. Glaiden's voice, when he spoke that last sentence, was humble and glad. Blanco is, to him, not only a hero (though God knows what he should find heroic in that quiet, pleasant, rather shut-away chap) but his hope for the future. Because Gillie played a trick on Strutt, I quarrelled with Lilley; because I quarrelled with Lilley, Lilley socked me and wrecked his career. Because Glaiden was shocked about Lilley, he decided to pull himself together. Because he'd made that decision he was ready, when the raid put Blanco out of action, to make a flying start on the process of self-

reconstruction. If the bomb had fallen a week or so ago, Glaiden might have approached the job through a fog of whisky and mucked it up completely.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, anyhow," Cassilis said.

"I am. No, honestly"—Glaiden's voice was surprised—"I really am!"

Gillie, as she prepared supper for Charmian, had time to consider the grotesque problem of Victor Tawney. How can I talk to that girl? How shall I begin? I suppose I can but try. What a fool I was to tell Vic I wouldn't take anything for the job. I'm not a philanthropist, and I don't see why I should behave like an idiot just out of love. If he asks me again I'll suggest that at least he gives me another bracelet, like the one he threw away. I don't see why, she repeated to herself, I should corner Eily for him simply out of love.

Out of love? That's what makes one dull, Gillie thought, as she slid a Welsh rarebit under the grill, when one's in love with nobody. As I'm in love with nobody. Not with Vic, not with Clifford, never in the world with young Ives. It is so long since I was in love that I have almost forgotten how it feels; and as I forget, so I get thinner and plainer and more fretted and more in need of fun. Fun! Here in this graveyard, as Ives called it, lying with Sam in this coffin, where's the hope of fun being anything more than a pretence, a cover-up, a rotten substitute? Only I don't lie with Sam. He snores away in his own room, fat and huge as a whale. The only man who makes me feel anything at all, for at least, when I think of him, I am angry.

She withdrew the grid, scraped the bread where it had scorched along the edges. That'll do for her. "Lucy! Go and put a light to the dining-room fire, will you?"

"I've done it, Ma'am, half an hour ago. It was freezing cold in there."

"I've told you about wasting fuel," said Gillie irritably. "Ten minutes is quite enough to warm the room up."

"Yes, Ma'am," said Lucy respectfully, but without admiration, and without belief.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TUESDAY NIGHT

"THE country towns exclude us," said Cassilis, "with locks, bolts, bars and double shutters." He was, for the while, utterly happy, listening in confident joy to the placid music of his own voice that ran, clear as a white thread in a tapestry, through the nine o'clock babble of the Fleece. It was not often that he could talk and they would listen, that they would be in a mood to accept, in amused and lazy kindliness, the arabesques of his released fancy. To-night they listened because of Charmian's presence, because, having her among them, they could not speak of the men, the mechanical incidents of the day, the official gossip. They sat about one of Gillie's round, glass-topped tables, Cameron-Leckie, Charmian and Strutt on the settee by the fire, Toller on the mushroom stool, Cassilis on a straight-backed chair tilted against a corner of the bar. "We can stay in them as long as we like, know everyone in the place; but we'll still be shut out. Anybody ever read a story by Algernon Blackwood about a man who came to a small French town that looked O.K. by day, but was really a black magic centre?"

"I think I did," said the B.C. hesitantly, "there was something about cats in it." He smiled. "Why, do you think there's a Christenhurst coven?"

"Christenhurst what?" Toller asked, puckering his forehead.

"It means a sort of witches' lodge, doesn't it?" Charmian suggested, flattering them all by making her statement a query.

"You must come up to Scotland for the witches," the B.C. told her, bending over slightly as if she were a baby in a high-chair, "for witches and warlocks. Let's see now; we had Major Weir of Edinburgh and of course Lord Soulis, whom they melted down in a casket of lead—was it lead?" Nobody knew. "Something of the sort, anyway, if my memory serves me."

Strutt said, "Cass is pretty near right, you know. The

army never gets to know these places. Look at Strethamfold; we brought the town business, but it never liked us."

Cassilis continued, his fancy soaring, "The shopkeepers had day-time faces for us, nothing-up-their-sleeve faces; but when we'd gone to bed of a night they all scuttled out of their houses and tore off to some mystic rite or other. Some of them even flew there."

The voice of the wireless, turned suddenly up, courteously announced a small-scale raid on an east coast town; there were several casualties, but none fatal.

"Yarmouth," said Toffit, nodding wisely. He and Menhenheott were drinking at the far end of the room with Phyllis Ricks who, in a pink blouse, glowed with the earthy luxuriance of a cabbage-rose.

"Sh-sh," Gillie admonished him, leaning over to set glasses on the table, "Hitler will hear you. And anyway, it's probably Cromer, or Norwich, or—where else is there?—Shoeburyness." She passed back through the crowd to the bar, over which Elvorden was leaning. On his face was an expression at once merry, fierce, secret and anticipatory; one calculated to awaken remark even in the least observant. To avoid him, she leaned over the round table and collected glasses. The Major said, "Now then, Miss Pickering——" in a voice of unconvincing persuasion, and was pleased when she refused a second glass of sherry. "You, Strutt? Every one, same again? You were drinking stout, Toller. Mrs. Eagles, please; three whiskies, one Guinness."

Strutt, seeing that Cassilis was happy, reopened the conversation for him. "Well, I agree that Christenhurst has its secrets, though I don't go so far as the broomsticks."

"All right," said Cassilis, "but it gets up to something. Methody, or Freemasonry, or Yoga. Something occult."

The B.C., unsmiling, protested.

"Sorry, sir. Let's say——"

"Mormonism," Charmian flushed, and with pride acknowledged the appreciative reception.

"Goetry," said Strutt, dragging the word from a crossword recess in his memory, "or is that the same as witches?"

The B.C., slowly unruffling, wishing to assure Cassilis that his blasphemy had been overlooked, said not very brilliantly, "Necromancy," and Toller concluded, as anti-climax, "Stamp-collecting."

"Round game?" Elvorden inquired, lowering his face for a second into the circle, his hand bearing down upon Strutt's shoulder.

"Go away," said Cassilis. "But seriously, sir," he addressed the Major, "do you see what I mean? These people have been left to themselves so long that they—not improperly, perhaps—resent us. However hard we try to ingratiate ourselves, we can never be more than trippers. I daresay some of them make wax images of us and stick pins in."

"You give me the creeps," Toller told him, "and you'll probably give Miss Pickering nightmares." Having snapped the silk of the conversation, he asked her if she had seen any London shows recently.

"I'm ashamed to say not. The theatres are very crowded, and as I never remember to book I usually end up in a cinema instead. Oh, wait a moment—I did see *The Doctor's Dilemma*. That was good."

"Shaw?" Toller was doubtful. "I like to see stuff that's not too heavy when I'm on leave, don't you, Strutty?"

"As a matter of fact, I prefer the cinema any old how."

"And Cass likes gloomy plays where every one talks in the dark the whole time."

"I'm old-fashioned," the B.C. said, smiling in a manner that dared any one to agree with the statement, "I'd rather spend an evening at a Gilbert and Sullivan opera than at the most gilded show Cochran could put on." He began to hum a tune.

"Thou the stream
And I the river."

"I could sing the *Nightmare Song* right through by memory at the age of eight and a half," said Strutt, "my people were great G. and S. admirers."

The Major looked at him with increased and wondering favour.

"Who was Paddington Pollaky?" Cassilis inquired, "I've often wondered. That came in *Gondoliers*, didn't it?"

"*Patience*," the B.C. corrected him. "I'm ashamed to admit that I don't know who he was."

"An aunt of mine was with d'Oyly Carte for seventeen

years, and she never found out," said Cassilis; "chorus, of course." The talk had drifted out of his control, like a tassel of cresses disentangled from a tow-rope. Idly he glanced along the length of the bar, saw Elvorden's face naked in fool's desire. Good God, he thought, Haw-Haw's after Gillie now, the silly little ass. Thinks no one's watching him. If Sam sees that look—because there are looks even a Sam will not tolerate . . . "Ives!" he called.

The boy jumped, spun round.

"What are you having?" Cassilis could think of nothing else to say. He rose, excused himself to Charmian and joined Elvorden at the bar.

"I'm drinking, thanks."

"Drink up, then."

"No, thanks. Thanks very much."

The boy was puzzled. Cassilis held him rigidly in conversation until Sam had left the bar to lend a hand in the saloon. Then he glanced at Gillie and saw a smile lying along the slits of her eyes. It was an instant's illumination, lending to the alabaster of her face an inward flame, yet Cassilis, receiving it, knew that she was prepared to admit him to her most secret councils. And he did not welcome the admittance; so he smiled vaguely at her, beat a foolish tattoo with two fingers on Elvorden's shoulder and moved away towards the radiogram to help Lejardin in the stacking of a dozen records.

"Put this in."

Lejardin looked and laughed. "*Lost Chord*, sir? Where did you find that?"

"It was stuck in with the others. Put it after *Blues in the Night*." Having worked this small mischief, Cassilis leaned back against the wall and surveyed the room. First, the bar: Gillie, bright-coloured against the frieze of coloured bottles doubled in the gilded mirrors, Gillie among men like a parrot among the jungle vegetation, that is, in her natural habitat. Second, Menhenheott, Toffit and Phyllis Ricks at the dart-board, the girl slanting straightly from her ankles as she threw, her hand flashing parallel with the strip of whitish matting. She turned in triumph and Menhenheott, released, unselfconscious, caught her about her nipped waist. Third, the round table by the fire; little Charmian, proud to have the officers about her, taking her in their charge;

Cameron-Leckie, consciously at play, conscious good-fellowship stamped like a simper down the rough-cut lines of his face, Strutt, ducking his light brown head as he looked at a photograph the Major had put on the table. Toller staring blankly, stupidly at Elvorden who, in full view of the room, had laid his large pink hand like a cushion over Gillie's.

In a moment the picture had dissolved. Gillie had twitched herself free, Elvorden had turned to greet Felse, Toller was leaning forward to answer some question of Charmian's. The Major was rising ; Charmian, rising too, said she must go early to bed.

"Are you coming, Eric?" Strutt asked. "I'd rather like to finish the chapter the bomb spoiled." He grinned. "The Inspector from the Yard had just discovered evidence of black magic orgies in the basement of a mysterious house on the Thames embankment. I must know what sort of orgies they were, though I don't suppose the author will tell me."

"The author probably doesn't know himself. All right, I'm coming with you. I didn't sleep well last night."

Strutt and Cassilis said good-night to Charmian, nodded to Elvorden and Felse, waved their hands to Gillie ; and with Toller and the Battery Commander, left the Fleece.

Menhenheott and Phyllis Ricks walked up the lane by All Saints and they kissed. After a while she said, "What's happened, Ron? You're different."

"No time to lose," he answered her.

She questioned him sharply. "No time? What do you mean? You're not going overseas?"

"Might be."

She was silent. Raising her hand, she let her fingers slide down his cheek. He peered at her, could see no change in her face and so was shocked when her eyes swelled with tears. She dashed them briskly away. "Why didn't you tell me? You'd no right to keep it to yourself."

"I've no obligations to you." His voice was surly.

"You have. You love me." She rested her body to his, gripped his shoulders and raising her face, set her brow against his lips. "Don't you?"

"Yes." He kissed her violently, screwing his mouth on hers. "Yes."

"You're not really going abroad."

"I may be."

"Who said so? Who told you so? When?"

"I applied to go."

"You applied!" said Phyllis, jerking back her head so that she might read his face. The moonlight fell on her eyes, making them seem blind. "Why? Why had you got to do that?"

"There wasn't any other way."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Maudie wants me to marry her at Christmas."

"Well?" Fresh tears broke through the glass of her eyes.

Fascinated by the angry honesty of her grief, a grief of which he had never dreamed her capable, he answered her plainly. "I can't do that. Nor can I ditch her. One day I'll marry her, as I said I would, and I'll do it when I've finished being in love with you, see? But I'll go on loving you so long as I have to see you, and I can't stand seeing you much more."

Her understanding was instant, yet unforgiving. "But why did you have to behave to me, to-night, as—as you have been doing? You know what I thought?" She writhed in his banding arms. "I thought perhaps you'd chucked that—that little bloodsucker——"

"You shut up!"

"——that snivelling little leech——"

"Shut up, Phyl, do you hear? I'll hit you."

"——that miserable, crawling——"

He shut her mouth with his hand. They stood motionless, captor and captive, their attitudes classical in the hard light of the pouring moon. Her eyes had closed. Gently Menhenheott parted his fingers. Beneath, her lips were smiling. He kissed them. "Phyl."

"It's true, what I say."

"True or not, it shouldn't be said."

"You still haven't told me why, to-night——"

He explained, "I'm going to love you in the time that's left."

"And that's the end?"

"Got to be."

"Sometimes," said Phyllis Ricks, easing herself out of

his arms and moving slowly, with mannequin steps, in the shadow of the hedge, "I think you're a bit loony, Ron. You've got so many fine feelings for her that you're going to marry her even if she makes you sick. That's gentlemanly, isn't it? But you've made up your mind to go all out with me, who you do love, and then leave me flat. Funny, isn't it?"

He was oppressed by the inelectable justice of what she had said, and in that moment all his false exultation fell away.

"Yes, you're right. O.K., Phyl. I must have been daft, after all. You wouldn't have me on those terms, would you? No decent girl would. Oh, I don't know; I think I'll go crazy at times. I don't even know if they will accept my application, anyhow. . . . It was just a hope. Seemed a chance."

She was a pace or two beyond him. Now she pivoted daintily on her heel, outspreading her arms for balance. She faced him.

"I wish they'd start the damned Second Front tomorrow," Menhenheott murmured, having for a moment forgotten her in the grief that belonged to them both. "I wish to hell they'd move. Aren't we planning anything, for God's sake? Rotting here while the Russians get murdered, poor beggars, yelling 'Good old Joe,' and able to do damn all. Wouldn't I go quick? Wouldn't I just like to get a slap in at the bloody Fascists? Wouldn't I just like——"

"I'd have you on any terms," said Phyllis Ricks.

In amazement he looked at her, saw her in her calm of every day, eyes serene, mouth humorous and a little wry, solid-seeming hair carved sharply away from the arrow on her brow.

"Phyl," he said.

"Any old terms," she repeated. "I love you, see? That's why. If you're in love you don't think about being respectable, or cheapening yourself, or 'giving' your lovely self for twopence. You don't even think of yourself as something to 'give,' just as if you were a gold watch or a canteen of cutlery. You just want to take love when it's held out to you. I want yours."

While he still sought an answer, he saw the grandeur that

was in her and knew that Maud could never in a million years, even had she been gifted, as Phyllis was gifted, with a right true fluency of tongue, have spoken so.

"For the time that's left," said Phyllis Ricks, as if it were some private joke between them. A corner of her mouth twitched, the flesh puckering about it.

Shutting his mind to the future, knowing that he could be happy if only he could accept the limiting of happiness, he took her back into his arms. Gently, wonderingly, they caressed each other, were like children discovering the peace of association. All Saints clock struck ten.

Dakin, alone in the Hounslow villa, switched off the wireless. His mother's room was empty about him, the emptier because her essences hung so heavily upon the air. On the bedside table was her knitting bag, the novel she had been reading. From the screw of the tallboy mirror dangled her hair-tidy, of basket-work embroidered with raffia violets; it was not quite clean of her dove-coloured combings. Then again, her slippers protruded from beneath the chair, set neatly side by side as if ready at any moment to advance of their own volition, and her serpentine chain, with locket and heart-shaped clasp, lay in the pin-tray. Her little "Douglas" brooch—the name written in garnets—was pinned for safety to the lid of the velvet trinket box: safer outside than in.

He could more easily have faced these things had she been dead. Then, at least, he would have known the answer to his fears, could have known loss as a fact and not as an abstract possibility. Now there was this agony to face again. Some day this journey in terror, this dead white waiting at the hospital, this moment before the doctor's lips take life and the wrinkles of speech disturb their crusts. Some day, all this to come again.

But this time they would not operate. The immediate danger had passed, and it would be as well to see how she went on. A strangulated hernia, said Doctor Creevey, is a funny thing—contemplating, in his mind, the comedy of intestinal disorder. Oh, nothing like a strangulated hernia for fun, Charlie Chaplin not a patch on it. You see, he told Dakin, you see—not to be technical—it slipped back into place, and Mr. Foe thought it best to let things be, for the

present, at any rate. We shall keep your mother under very close observation, Chris—you don't mind an old man calling you Chris? An old man who lugged you into the world, and a tough job you were, too, between you and me.

So to-morrow Aunt Dora would come to stay, and her sister would be brought home to the room made cosy for her, and Dakin would go back to the army to wait the next terror.

"Back to the army again, Sergeant,
Out of the cold and the rain."

Better, Dakin thought in despair, to sleep under bridges, to sleep on some newspapers in Covent Garden, to rot in a damp hayrick, than to go back to the army. As a child he had suffered agonies on the last days of the holidays. To leave his mother's fierce protection, the warmth of her circling love, and return to the shouting, jeering, public horror of school! What have I done that I should be treated like this? Mother and I, we did no one any harm. We didn't care who ruled the world so long as they left us together to share our little jokes, our little, modest pleasures. We would have conformed to any order, given no one any trouble. One day I might even have married, because a man who is a man must always marry, and mother and I and Madge would have lived together quiet as mice, doing nobody any harm.

I do not want to kill or to be killed. I do not want to be made evil by this enforced loneliness; when I was allowed to live my own life I had no cause to be ashamed of myself, no cause to shrink from the flash of my own body in a mirror. All this is not my fault.

Now, at home once more, he had lost even the petty consolation of Eily, was fighting not to accept her as a further failure, a further smear upon his conscience. Yet what harm did I do? We were lonely together. She was kind. I treated her always as I would have treated a girl of my own class, never as if she were riffraff. I thought she had saved me, but now I am not so sure that she didn't add more guilt to my soul. Because I made her afraid.

Dakin believed in the soul. He visualised it as a small, transparent Christopher, feeble and naked, penned inside

his own flesh as a prisoner is penned in the Iron Maiden. A thing the shape of a man in a man-shaped prison. Christopher the Soul cried out in agony to the man Dakin: Wash me clean, wash me clean.

He rose from the bedside, crossed the room and took from the shelf an anthology of English poems. Now I will read, and concentrate upon what I am reading, and forget myself. I must forget myself or go mad.

"Fall, winter, fall; for he,
Prompt hand and headpiece clever,
Has woven a winter robe,
And made of earth and sea
His overcoat for ever,
And wears the turning globe."

But not poetry that brings tears to the eyes, turns the heart in its ball of blood. If only I had a friend; but I never made friends. Vic is all right, but he is too sure of himself, too happy to be close to me. He takes life easily, has no fears, is calm in his own laziness. He does not even feel shame to be in the ranks, as I would feel it if I came of a family like his.

If I could get a commission I would be different, I know. It would give me a clean start. I will go back, be brave, be strong, not give way; and after a while, when I have proved myself (a knight in crystalline armour slaying the valley lions, stealing the water from the fountain of eternal youth, thrusting into his sack the three heads of the giant Blunderbore) I will put in for a commission. They will have to give me my chance.

He had no heart for reading. Replacing the book, he took up his mother's hand-mirror, silver-backed, with cupids in a ribbon sling, and peered at his face. Tentatively he squeezed at a blackhead, pulled down his lower lid to see if there was a stye forming. If I looked fit I should look decent; big eyes, nose big but well enough shaped, hair curly; they can never cut all the curl away.

The door bell rang. Going downstairs, he admitted Madge Emmott.

"Oh, hullo, Chris," she said breathlessly. (Madge always sounded as if she had been running.) "I just looked in to

ask how Mrs. Dakin was. I know it's late, but they kept me at the office till half-past seven."

He took her into the sitting-room, where he lit the gas-fire. "Glad to see you. Do take your coat off?"

"Not right now," she said, "if you don't mind."

It was bitterly cold. He wondered for a moment if he would take her up to his mother's bedroom, which had been heated since six o'clock, decided such unconventionality was for the Tawneys of the world, who did not live cheek by jowl with neighbours.

"Mother's coming home to-morrow. You know they're not going to operate?"

"Yes, Mummy told me. I'm so glad. It's a weight off your mind, isn't it, Chris?"

He nodded, not wishing to explain himself to her.

"Mrs. Dakin's such a dear," said Madge; "I'm so fond of her." She was a lean, colourless girl, sharp-nosed, her brown eyes enormously magnified by her thick lenses. Her hair was stiffly waved, held in place by a net which gave it a disagreeably cohesive appearance, as if it could be removed in one piece. Only her mouth was beautiful and that, broad, rose-red, Dakin had loved. Under a coat of fur fabric she wore a dress of maroon stuff, with blue embroideries.

"Is there anything she'd like? Can she eat sweets?"

"I'm not sure; perhaps better not risk it. She'd like some magazines, though."

"Oh, good! I'll borrow some *Lifes* from Mrs. Phelan, shall I?"

Dakin gave her a cigarette. "You are extravagant," said Madge, "you with your Gyppies." She added, "When are you going back?"

"Tea-time to-morrow. I'll see Mother settled in first."

"Still hating it?"

"The Army? Oh, one gets used to anything."

"You'll be getting a second stripe soon." She touched his sleeve.

"Maybe." Dakin wondered how much longer he would keep the one he had.

"Are there any A.T.S. at Christenhurst?"

He shook his head. "No girls, except the ones in the N A A F I."

"I should think it would be nicer with the A.T.S. about.

I often wish I'd joined, if I could have been sure of a commission. Dad thinks I'd meet the wrong kind of girls in the ranks. I tell him it's not right to talk like that, though, when you think of the wonderful work they're doing. After all, you're in the ranks, aren't you ? "

" They're good chaps," said Dakin. " I'd miss them if I became an officer." He hoped for her admiration.

" But you're bound to be one sooner or later ? "

" Oh, I suppose so. If I want to be. Sometimes it doesn't seem worth the trouble. It isn't as if I'm the sort that cares about the uniform. As a matter of fact, I don't think there'd be half the applications for commissions if they did away with service dress. Officers ought to be dressed like the men."

" But aren't they, nowadays ? In the fighting, anyhow."

" Oh, yes, but they have S.D. for evenings and going around at week-ends."

" It is rot, isn't it ? " she agreed scornfully. She added, " I suppose it helps prestige. The cane and all that."

He retorted, " If a man can't command respect without carrying a bit of stick around, then he's no good anyway."

United in their contempt of snobbery, they smiled at each other without fear.

She said boldly, " You don't write to me often."

He flushed. " I'm kept so busy. Anyhow, it's so hard to find anywhere to write. There's only the N A A F I, and the row's awful in there. Can't hear yourself think."

" Oh, I see." She was quiet. Stooping from her chair, she held out her hands to the fire and the light shone through them. Not looking at him she said, " You don't feel about me as you did, do you, Chris ? "

" Of course I do." He moved restlessly, picked up a cigarette-end from the hearth and dropped it into the bowl of water placed there to absorb the fumes of the gas.

" No. You're different."

" Look," said Dakin stiffly, " being in the army does something to you. Things that were important don't seem quite real any longer, plans you used to cling to start seeming silly. I still care about you, Madge ; there couldn't be any one else ; but somehow everything's different. I can't explain."

" I see."

"You don't. If you can say it in that way, it means you don't see."

She murmured, "I do wish you'd confide in me, Chris. I might help."

"There's nothing to confide."

"Is there . . . you're not in any trouble?"

"No. But Madge, I'm not really fit for you any more. I mean——"

She started up, her face disorderly with fright beneath her orderly hair.

"Chris! You've got to tell me!"

"I'm a man," he said, "like other men. In the army you go crazy with loneliness sometimes, unless you're the type that likes to go around with a crowd. I've had my consolations, like the rest of them. I'm not proud of it; on the contrary. But it makes you too decent for me."

He realised how ridiculously he had glamourised even his own guilt. Consolations! Poor little Eily Fogg, the truth behind his conveyed picture of a dozen roaring girls. And even that truth exaggerated.

"Then there is someone else," Madge said, trembling. She sat straightly in her chair, facing him, her hands locked in her lap, her feet, in their decent flat shoes, pressed tightly each to each.

He answered patiently, "I've told you, no one. Anyway, not now. But I've played the fool a bit."

"I should have thought," she whispered in bitterness, "that any man with *will-power* could have kept clean."

"You don't know what it's like. Madge, I'll come back to you again if you'll have me. But I must wait for a bit, sort myself out."

"You're not——" She hesitated. He saw her throat tighten, relax. "You're not ill?"

"Don't you dare say that," Dakin said softly. The dark colour swept his face. "No. Of course not."

"I'm sorry." She began to cry.

"Don't do that. It's all right."

"Chris, I did trust you so! Let me go on trusting. Let's pretend all this has been a bad dream."

Suffocating with misery, he drew his chair close to hers, passed his arm about her neck and pressed her head down on to his shoulder; and so they sat like a young couple at

the cinema, the gas-fire their screen. "It was only the one girl, Madge. That's the truth."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. I can't even remember her surname."

She believed him, her peaceful lips quite clearly showing her credence.

"I'm a rotten thing," said Dakin. "I'll never make a hero."

When Madge spoke her whole face had conformed suddenly to the beauty of her mouth and, like it, was strong. "Well, after all, what is a hero? They aren't born. We talk about 'our brave boys' when war comes, but they're just the same boys we knew when they were in shops and offices. Ordinary men. It's ordinary men who become heroes, when the chance comes: it doesn't have to be a special kind of man. How do you know what you'll be, Chris? Your trouble is, you think you're the only soldier in the whole army who's a misfit. Thousands of men don't want to be soldiers. It's the same as taking millions of men and expecting them all to be steeplejacks. Some would get on all right, some would always be frightened of heights. But they'd manage somehow, if they had to. And some of them would be heroes." She added violently, "I believe in you. I do. I believe you'd be just as brave, just as fine as anybody else when the chance came. Why don't you just try to face things? However much you grouse, you've got to carry on. We all have."

He mumbled. "You and my mother. . . . If it wasn't for thinking of you I don't know what I'd do." He realised she had believed no word of his early pretence to have accepted his lot. He kissed her cheek.

"I'll always trust you," said Madge. It was a different trust from Maud Fletcher's trust in Menhenheott, for it had no foundations in fear, nor was stated as a weapon of coercion. Dakin realised its genuineness, and it strengthened his resolve to make the fresh start that should bring him from disgrace into the officers' mess.

"You're wonderful, Madge," he said.

The clock struck ten.

"I'd better go, Chris. Mummy and Dad will be wondering where I've got to."

"Don't they know?"

"Yes, but——"

"But what?"

"They know you're alone. Oh, you understand how they are; conventional. Old-fashioned."

"Do them good to get over it," said Dakin stoutly, but speaking out of panic lest, when he was alone again, he should find himself recaptured by fear. "Don't think I'm being rude to them, of course. I like your people."

"No, dear, I must go." She was beaming with happiness now, sure of her grip upon him. She did not even remember the moment when some impulse beyond her control had made her speak to him of heroism, and speak not out of a desire to bind him by eloquence, but simply from the instinct to give all she had to make him, for his own sake, strong and high-hearted. They kissed. "I suppose I shan't see you to-morrow, before I go to town?"

"I'm afraid not. I'll have to get the place straight for Aunt Dora, and Lord knows how early she'll arrive. But it isn't so long now till my next leave."

"How long?"

"About a month."

She clung to him. "Make it go quickly. I'll pray for you—does that seem silly?"

"Not your prayers."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes. But sometimes I don't know why. Everything seems so mad, this killing of harmless people, millions of grown men going out to bash other grown men they don't know from Adam."

"If we understood God He wouldn't seem so marvellous," said Madge. "He wouldn't be God at all."

"I'd rather understand Him and let Him be somebody else," Dakin retorted, mentally begging God's pardon if He should mistakenly have suspected irony.

Madge patted his cheek. He remembered this trick, one he had forgotten. The old irritation rose in him. "Keep faith," she said, and slipped past him, across the room, down the dark hallway and out of the door which she closed, velvet-fingered, behind her.

Yes, and that trick, too; of throwing out an exit line and then skipping off. Feeling cold, he made himself a cup of Bovril and carried it upstairs to his mother's room, which

was flamingo-coloured in the leaping light of the fire. The coals had fallen apart, exposing a burning heart, gold-speckled. A few sparks clung like fireflies to the soot at the back of the grate. Dakin, sitting in this harlequin light, was surprised to find himself wondering whether he could really bear to marry Madge. He took from his pocket a most precious possession: a letter written to him, in babyhood, by his mother and never revealed until the day he joined the army. The sheet of paper was cracked across by constant folding, the ink had faded to harebell blue.

"MY DEAR LITTLE SON,—Though you are only two, and such a darling two with your frank blue eyes and your busy little hands, I am writing you this letter so that you can read it when you are a man and know how much your mother loved you.

"I want you to grow up as fine and straight a man as your daddy, strong in the fear of God, and proud to be an Englishman. Never be mean, never be cruel, never be callous. When you men are really big and grown-up, we women seem very weak to you, and often you tease us a little when we try to advise you. Still, dear, I want you to know that a mother's wisdom is quite a big thing and that your mother will use every bit of the wisdom God has given her to help her son.

"One day you will get married, dear. It is a day every mother dreads, and some so hate to lose their babies that they are never truly kind to the woman of his choice. I promise not to be like that, little Christopher, and will do my best to make the wife of your choosing as fond of me as I hope you will be, so that she and I can be bound together by the task of making you happy. Then perhaps we can all be together, and I need not lose you at all. And now, how funny, I must stop writing because it is time for you to go sleepy-bye. I wonder, if you ever read this, whether you will think your mother is a silly, sentimental old thing? Good-bye, my lamb, and God bless you."

His most precious possession. His nose prickled, the hot flesh swelled in his throat. So precious. He was bitterly ashamed of the times when that letter had made him ready to kick the doors in with rage.

Never mind : Mother is coming home, she is in no danger, she may never be in danger again. She is sixty-two ; she was nearly middle-aged when I was born. If only she had borne me early in life, how many more years of her I should have had ? Yet even now, she may live for another twenty years. How cruel, how cruel that war should wrench a single hour of this precious time away from us !

He went downstairs, washed out the cup and replaced it on its hook, undressed and washed himself and slept that night on the couch in her room. From the empty bed he heard the ghost of her soprano breathing, smelled the ghosts of her perfumes, lavender water, violet powder, and her one real extravagance, fern-scented soap, the colour of bracken in a spring mist. Flinging his arms from the sheets, he caught the soft and rosy ghost of her hand, held it till daybreak.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WEDNESDAY : BEFORE BLACKOUT

CLAUD PICKERING smiled at his half-sister, asked the nurse to bring a chair for her, and held out a piece of butter-scotch on the palm of his hand. The light, falling in shadowed strands through the tall windows, had a certain appearance of blanched cleanliness as if, by their passage through a tank of antiseptic fluid, the colour had been soaked out of the rays.

" Where did you get that ? " she asked him.

" One of the nurses bought it for me. I suddenly had a most tremendous urge for toffee—the kind of urge women get in pregnancy, I should think—and talked about it so much at breakfast that she got me some from the village. Her own coupons, too."

" So you're spoiled," said Charmian, eating the sweet.

" Thank God, yes. What's that book ? "

" Something Cassilis sent you."

" Give it here." He looked at it, feathering the pages with his thumb. " Oh, good ; now I'll prolong my illness for a bit. You're going home to-day, aren't you ? "

"I've no excuse for staying. You're looking very well, Claud."

"Sh-h-h," he murmured. "I am well, but don't let the doctor hear you. What did you do with yourself last night? I thought about you."

"Oh, I was fêted! The Major, Strutt, Cassilis and that elderly red-faced lieutenant entertained me in the Fleece."

"What, Sadness, too? I'm honoured. Was he jovial?"

"In a ponderous way," she answered.

"You liked Strutt, didn't you?"

"Yes. And Cassilis."

"Cass is a nice chap, but he won't make a soldier."

"Oh, well, that doesn't matter. The war's only temporary."

"Is it? I hope so. Sometimes I can see twenty-five years of it looming ahead."

"Nonsense," said Charmian uneasily.

"You're too young to tell me I talk nonsense. See anything of young Tawney?"

"I accosted him," she answered, but without matching a smile to her words.

"You did?"

"Well," she explained slowly, "he tried to slip by me. I thought perhaps he didn't like to recognise me." She paused. "I telephoned Mother this morning, telling her when to expect me. She said a letter had come from Roy."

"And——?"

"I couldn't wait to get back, so I asked her to read it. Anyway, to read the gist; there were four and a half pages. Of course, it nearly made mother sick."

"What did he say?"

"He's still saying he's sorry. He doesn't know his own mind, I gather. He talks about being friends, if I could bear to be."

"The old nonsense."

"Yes, I think so. You know, he'd jilt that girl if I gave him the least encouragement." She looked at him, her eyes clear as a kitten's. "Shall I?"

"I'm giving you no advice."

"I want you to help me," said Charmian, and there was, in her voice, a shadow of rebuke.

"All right, have it your own way. I think," he began,

rather slowly, as if finding it difficult to choose the words that should hurt her least, " that you're suffering a little less from Roy than would have seemed possible last week-end. If you were crazy to have him back, you'd never have asked my advice at all for fear I'd tell you not to."

" I'm still wretched," Charmian told him, looking tearful and at the same time a little angry, " I always shall be."

He regarded her gravely. " Listen, Charm, and listen very carefully, because this is wisdom. Don't be reluctant to stop grieving simply because you're afraid Helena and I will think you're too young to understand suffering. I know what's in your mind, or what will be in it. You think, ' If I start being happy again too soon, Claud and Mother will say, ' Oh, well, then it couldn't have been real love at all.' Your pride can't bear us assuming that you're incapable of love, and you feel, at present, that it would be a shocking come-down to stop brooding over Roy. Well, Helena may take that line, but I won't. I shall think you've got a good, mature head on your shoulders."

She was obstinately silent. Nevertheless, he saw the interest flash beneath her lashes, and about her mouth an amused ruefulness.

" Tell me about Tawney," he coaxed. " You liked him, I know."

" He snubbed me flat," said Charmian, readily and freshly. She awaited comment, sitting upright in her chair, like a child who is expecting to be told the result of an examination.

" He did ? I'll have him flogged on the barracks square. Why ? "

" I don't know. He looked very miserable."

" Don't know why he should be. How did he snub you ? "

" It was the *manner*," Charmian replied, after some thought. She added, " You see, at the dance he said something about me lunching with him one day when he was on leave, if he ever became a General, or after the war if he never did."

" And you—— ? " he prompted.

" Yesterday I just mentioned his invitation and said it didn't matter about the General."

" Oh, I say," Pickering protested, trying not to laugh at her, " that's a bit too much ! Where's your dignity ? "

"You know," she told him confidentially, "I often wonder if I just lack it, as some people lack an ear for music. I'm never embarrassed when I ought to be, though I sometimes am when I ought not to."

Pickering looked at her, admired her. She would be a charming woman. He said, to amuse himself and her, "All my brother officers are bachelors—or that's the hypothesis. You are a beautiful princess, compelled to choose a consort within five minutes or be eaten by a dragon. Which one will you have?"

"Oh," she replied at once, and with sureness, "Strutt."

"Strutt! Good Lord, is he so fascinating? What about Elvorden?"

"Elvorden!" she was scornful. "I hate pretty men. When I get married, I shall want to be the pretty one. No, I like Strutt because he seems really grown-up."

"Yes, I see what you mean, or I think I do. Yes, I suppose he is. Glaiden's mental age is twenty, Lilley's was thirteen, and Elvorden's is two. But what's wrong with Cassilis?"

"He's too grown-up," she answered. "He looks as though he's tried all the excitements and decided peace is best. I should want someone who could discover a few of the excitements with me."

"Oh, Charmian," he said, laughing till his eyes watered, "you are Helena's girl! You are, really. And despite all appearance to the contrary."

She ignored him. "Why did you say Lilley's age *was* whatever it was? Has he left the Battery?"

"Yes, in a way. He's in trouble." He told her about it.

"Serve him right," said Charmian at once.

"Well, you hard little beast!"

"Not at all. If he can do a thing like that he must be a rotten officer, and it's better for him not to be in the army."

"But his career!" he protested. "He's pretty well finished for good and all. Honestly, you're as hard as nails, and you never got hardness from Helena. Or not that sort of hardness."

"You're a sentimentalist," she told him, "and if I'm hard, I must have had it from father."

"You never knew him."

"No, but I'm sure he was *grand*," said Charmian illogically. She looked at her watch. "I must go, if I'm going to catch the midday bus. Glaiden's coming up to see you, by the way. He's dreadfully busy because the B.C.'s gone to a conference at Strethamfold, and poor Glaiden has to be head-cook-and-bottle-washer."

"You know all the regimental business," he admired. "We'll have to make you Honorary Colonel."

"Oh, that reminds me. It was a C.O.'s conference."

"Not exciting," he snubbed her. "Plenty of those. Well, pet, thank you for coming to see me, and tell Helena I am Out of the Wood, capital O, capital W. Don't let her send me a huge basket of grapes at eighteen-and-six a pound, because it will only make me look an idiot and a Black Market racketeer. Give her my love."

She rumpled his flap of thick, blanched hair, kissed him and left the hospital to wait, in the bright windy day, at the bus stop on the hill. When she returned to the Fleece and was upstairs in the bedroom packing her suitcase, someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," she called, and Lucy poked her head into the room. She smiled at Charmian, looked back across her shoulder, then hopped over the threshold lightly as a bird over a sill. From the pocket of her apron she took a letter, which she put on the dressing-table.

"A soldier left it, miss," she whispered, glancing about her as though there were spies in the closet and under the bed, "he said I was to give it you myself."

Charmian examined the tidy, rather cramped handwriting, said wonderingly, "Thank you, that was very kind." She found a sixpence. "Thank you very much."

"Thank *you*," said Lucy, smiling in a fashion secret and motherly, "no trouble at all." She skipped out again, closing the door softly behind her.

Charmian tore the flap, drew out the sheet of lined paper, saw the signature. Her heart moved in a faint, surprising excitement.

"DEAR MISS PICKERING,—I'm afraid I sounded very rude to you when we talked last night, and I've been worrying about it.

"You were sweet to me, which makes me feel worse.

I was in the middle of a pack of personal troubles—I still am—and felt I had no right to speak to you at all till it was cleared up. Believe me when I say I've done nothing of which I need be ashamed, and I hope, when it's over, to be able to meet you and, if you'll listen, tell you about the whole mess.

"I'm due for leave, in five weeks' time. If, *and only if*, all is well then, I will write to you (I don't know where to write, but I shall find out somehow) and ask you to lunch with me in town. If you refuse to come, I shall realise that it's all I deserve, but please don't!

"Sincerely yours,

"VICTOR TAWNEY."

She thought, What a fool he is! Couldn't he have guessed that I'd have tried to help him? No; whatever trouble he's in, it can't be his fault. 'Personal,' he says; does that mean at home, or some muddle in the army? Money? Never that. Claud said he came of a wealthy family and had a private income. Some girl? She shrugged, smiled at her reflection in the mirror. I suppose it could be. But surely nothing serious, nothing ugly. He's too nice.

Now then: how is he going to find out where I live? I suppose he can hardly ask Claud, and the 'phone's in Dan's name. She told herself soberly that heroes of chivalry had far harder tasks than to discover the heroine's address: and then she laughed at the fancy. But if Tawney had lived in the days of dragons he'd have worn armour as a matter of course; it would have been a kind of battle dress.

When Claud asked me the question about the princess he only gave me the choice of officers.

"Yes," said Charmian aloud, defiantly, "I do like Tawney. If I saw him often I might even forget Roy, and that's that."

She stuffed her nightdress into the last available space and rammed the case shut. Cheerfully, because a little of the pride so wounded by MacGregor had been unexpectedly restored to her, she went downstairs.

Strutt, who before lunch had edged Cassilis up to the washroom, closed the door behind him and said, in a gleeful whisper, "I say, there's a new scandal. Have you heard?"

"No. What?"

"Not about last night's row in the Fleece? Just after we'd left?"

"Not a word. What is it? Where did you hear it?"

"Mulcaster, of course. You'd have heard it, too, if you hadn't got up an hour before you needed."

Cassilis seated himself on the edge of a basin, swung his legs. "I'm all ears."

"Sam ticked Elvorden off. This is how it happened, so far as I can see——"

"What's the matter with you," Cassilis interrupted, "laryngitis?"

"Don't be a fool. If you don't whisper up here you can be heard all over the mess, and it hasn't leaked out yet. Apparently it started when someone put on a record of the *Lost Chord*. Mulcaster said it sounded funny coming just after a swing number, and every one laughed. He——"

"I didn't know Mulcaster was in the Fleece last night."

"He wasn't. He got it from the lads who were. Well, anyway——"

"Before you go on," Cassilis murmured, "I was responsible for *The Lost Chord*. Lejardin was stacking the records, so I slipped it in for fun. Not that that's relevant. Well?"

"Elvorden had been drinking somewhat. You know how he is—two fizzy lemonades make him noisy, and a stone-ginger gives him a crapula. He's no head. Well, he looked round to see what the mirth was about, and seemed to get the idea that every one was laughing at him. He said, 'What the devil?' and Felse said, 'It's the *Lost Chord*, sir; a big incong*ru*ous.' Or so Mulcaster reported. Elvorden went brick-red and shouted to the lads round the radiogram, 'Take that thing off at once!' They were all pretty annoyed and didn't jump to it right away. Elvorden strode over, pointed to the gram and bawled at Lejardin, 'Do as I tell you! Take it off!"

Cassilis sighed, "Oh, dear, oh, dear."

"You've heard nothing yet. Well, the immediate result was a tableau; Elvorden epileptic with rage, Lejardin slowly putting out his hand to stop the music, and the lads standing round like a musical comedy chorus. Then Sam came out from the bar, walked on to the stage, as it were,

and said with a sort of horrid clarity, 'I'd have you know, Mr. Elvorden, that this house is as free to the men as to the officers, and I'm as glad to have one lot as the other. Any one can play what tunes they like and no one's going to interfere.'

"Elvorden said, 'How dare you!' or something ineffectual, and Lejardin, trying to save the situation, stopped the machine and put the record back in the box. Sam immediately took it out and stuck it back on the gram, turning up the volume control. It was lovely. The tenor went on raving about Death's Bright Angels, and Elvorden roared, 'Eagles, you're insulting!' Sam roared back at him, 'This is my house, and I'll play what records I please. I like this tune, see? And if you don't like it you can go somewhere else.' By this time, the lads had melted to the back of the room. Elvorden was sort of bubbling, looking as if he'd either hit Sam or burst into tears——"

"If he'd hit Sam he'd have been mincemeat in five minutes," Cassilis observed.

"—and Sam was leaning against the gram, rolling his eyes upwards as though he were absolutely transported by the heavenly strains. Then Glaiden, who'd come in just in time to hear the conclusion of the row, tapped young Ives on the sleeve and drew him resolutely outside. Mulcaster's information ceases at this point, except that he says Sturgess heard Elvorden shouting that he'd never set foot in the place again."

Strutt paused, breathless, awaiting the applause.

"Bravo," said Cassilis, "very fine story. It'll keep me happy all day. But I say, this is a bad time for Ives to be banished from the Fleece, because he's Gillie's latest capture."

"Get away!"

"He is. I saw him playing Footie, or the equivalent last night. Toller saw it, too, so I wouldn't be surprised if Ives wasn't in trouble from that quarter, too."

"They talk of that little rat Eily Fogg pestering the brutal, licentious soldiery," said Strutt, "but I'm damned if she holds a candle to Gillie."

"Gillie's an attractive dollop of mischief," Cassilis said, sliding down from the basin and filling it with water, "and will bring about her own ruin sooner or later. No, idleness

is the trouble with her, and with some of us. Wait till the push starts."

"Push my foot."

"It's coming; you'll see. I've got a hunch something's in the wind already." He rinsed the yellow soap from his hands, drying them on a starchy, non-absorbent towel. "I bet Glaiden pitched into Ives. Old Tubby's been a changed man since yesterday morning."

"Probably told him there'd be trouble if he didn't keep out of the Fleece. You know what Sadness is; he'd have the hide off Elvorden for that kind of Hitlerism."

"It'll probably get round to the B.C. anyhow. Felse will tell him the moment Sadness gets back."

"Felse won't," said Strutt, "and for a very good reason. Toddy knows that whatever sort of louse Haw-Haw may be personally, he's pure, natural, hundred-per-cent gunner. Put Haw-Haw in action, and he'll come back smothered in decorations and we shall all have to pretend we love him because he's a hero."

"It takes all sorts to win a war," Cassilis observed tolerantly.

They went downstairs together into the mess, the last of the officers to sit at table. It was the pleasantest room in the building, with the fullest share of the noonday sun, the ceiling handsomely moulded, the panelling in good repair. Before the hearth was an excellent Turkey carpet, russet and blue, the gift of Mrs. Cameron-Leckie.

Glaiden, at the head of the table, had assumed the non-committal blandness of the Commanding Officer, eschewing private malice, ready to hear the gossip but to make only abstract comment upon it. Elvorden, still surly, picked at his plate; he had managed to create about himself an atmosphere that would have been palpable even to an entering stranger. Toller, ignoring him, addressed his remarks to Glaiden.

"Mrs. Felse has departed," Strutt told every one cheerfully, accepting from Butterfield some lukewarm soup of a universal character, "I saw her going off on the bus this morning."

"Well, thank God for that," Toller observed, "now he'll be better tempered. And little May can come out of hiding."

"Mrs. Felse must have been handsome when she was young," Cassilis said, "an Augustus John gypsy. I bet when he first met her she was wearing a bright green hat and fourteen ropes of beads."

"Cross your palm for sixpence." Toller reached for the margarine. "Talking about fortune-tellers, they've cut half the astrologers out of the papers now, haven't they?"

"Pity," said Glaiden, "some of them were pretty wonderful. It's a miracle to be so consistently wrong."

"Don't you think there's *anything* in it?" Elvorden demanded belligerently, too fascinated by the subject to maintain silence. His eyes, blue as lobelia, were like a furious six-year-old's.

Strutt laughed. "I believe there's an Act of Parliament under which you could have fortune-tellers whipped. If I were dictator I'd invoke it."

"Your law's wrong, my boy," murmured Glaiden, who had once read for, and abandoned, the bar. "However!"

"Seriously, it is poisonous to encourage a nation in superstition. It's unhealthy. It makes fools of us as a people, and might sap the capacity for any sort of action. Why put yourself out to work and struggle if your future's already worked out for you?"

"But it's only fun."

"To plenty of people it isn't fun," Cassilis rejoined, "though I don't take so dim a view of the matter as Strutty does. There are still witch-cults in this country, by the way."

"Had enough of witches last night," Toller said. "Three things barred from mess conversation: shop, women and witches."

"When my father was in India they were really strict," Elvorden murmured, "about talking shop, I mean. Didn't dare say a word, or you were put down as a yoick straight away."

"What does Goering talk about at table?" Glaiden teased him.

Elvorden tightened his lips. After a while he replied obstinately, but with a certain lack of conviction, "Goering's a brute, of course; but he's amazingly cultured. Quite a good fellow, on the surface."

"And what a surface!" said Strutt.

"I never know why, as a democracy," Cassilis observed, "we should jeer at Hitler for being a house-painter. Surely that's irrelevant? If he were a nice fellow instead of a nasty one, we'd think it most creditable of him to have advanced himself so far. To deride a man on account of his working-class origin—Hitler, by the way, was a petit bourgeois and not a house-painter by trade—is Fascist behaviour. It's as stupid as jeering at Christ because He was a carpenter—though you'll appreciate that I'm drawing no close analogy."

"What is a petit bourgeois precisely?" Elvorden asked, "I thought that was Communist talk. You're not a *Marxist*, are you?" He drawled the word.

"Oh, Lord," Cassilis replied, "I'm not tough enough. Marxism takes away the church and then asks every man to be a saint. It's too much."

"As I understand it," said Strutt, scraping custard, which he disliked, from his pudding, "Marxism doesn't. It expects every man to behave according to the interests of his class. As I suppose most people do."

"Lots of Reds among the men," Elvorden observed. "You can't get through an A.B.C.A., even if it's about the rotation of crops, or something, without the damned Second Front rearing its head."

"What was the news to-day, by the way?" Cassilis asked.

"Much as usual. Stalingrad holding out. Limited German advance in the northern suburbs," Glaiden told him. He turned to Elvorden. "Oh, well, it's not a bad thing. How much better to have the men yelling for a chance to get at Jerry than to have them yelling for a negotiated peace!"

"All the same, they don't know anything."

"The people who said Russia wouldn't last six weeks didn't know anything, either," Strutt remarked, adding hastily lest they should think (quite correctly) that he himself was inclined to favour the demand—"though I admit it all gets a bit monotonous. I've got an A.B.C.A. to-day on town planning. They'll Second Front that at their peril."

"Bet you they do," said Glaiden. He rose. "Well, back to the grind. Oh, by the way, we've got a new man coming next week to replace Lilley. I know nothing about him, except that his name's Evans and he's an Australian."

"Good-oh," Toller said, scraping back his chair. "Too right. Someone fresh to teach how one spells Menhenheott."

"Why the working-classes don't have suitable names I can't imagine." Elvorden strolled over to the windows.

"Make 'em use phonetics," Strutt murmured to Cassilis, "the low swine. Haw-Haw has spoken."

"Men-hen-yot," Elvorden repeated indignantly to himself, "Men-hen-yot!"

"Come to that," Glaiden told him mildly, "I wasn't sure at first which syllabie of your name had the accent. For quite a while I used to put it on the second." He strolled out.

Cassilis, on his way upstairs with Strutt, said suddenly, "I know what got into Sam. He saw Ives with Gillie. I didn't think he had, but now I'm sure it's so. One of these days, you mark my words, he'll take that girl and cut her throat from ear to ear."

I'm a fool, I'm a fool, I'm a fool, said Gillie to herself, doing this rubbishy thing for Vic, leaving Strethamfold long before I need, missing the pictures and my tea.

The lane that led from the main road over the hill to the big house was threaded through half a mile of the Geogehans' estate. The quarter-mile radius lying near to the house itself was finely kept, the lawns well-barbered, the fir trees graciously planted so they might afford relief from the light and level greenness; but beyond the belt, like a moat describing the castle bounds, was a further belt of wild and florid growth, of woods and coppices, briar-hedges and low brambles freckled with emerald. Here, though the ground was nominally private, the local children played. Since the outbreak of war there had been only one keeper on the estate and he, an elderly, indolent man without feudal instinct, took no pains to keep this English jungle inviolate. So Gillie crossed the stile and walked up the lane till she came to a small wood where, in a clearing, there was a great fallen oak tree, the children's joy. She heard the clock strike four. Spreading her mackintosh, she sat down.

There was no wind in the wood, but high above it, in the branches, the gale screamed like a bedlam choir. The sky, showing glassy blue between the boughs, was flooded now and then with the albuminous whiteness of cloud. From

where Gillie sat, she could see the lane rising upwards to meet the fences that marked the jungle's end. In a little while, a scrap of red cloth glimmered through the trees and the little noises of the wood blew up to herald the intruder. Eily Fogg came into view. She wore her mother's winter coat, was carrying a parcel.

Gillie thought of a song she had sung at school. When beautiful Kitty one morning was tripping with a pitcher of milk to the fair of Coleraine. For a moment she was embarrassed, feeling herself at a ridiculous disadvantage. Had Eily not seen her she would have kept silence, have stayed quiet as a mouse until the girl had passed by.

"Hullo," said Gillie.

"Oh, hullo," Eily answered nervously, "hullo, Mrs. Eagles." It was the first time either had addressed the other. "Windy, isn't it?"

"It's awful outside."

Eily nodded, made to pass on.

"Here, I want to talk to you."

"Me?" The girl jumped, drew back.

"I won't eat you. Come on, you're not in a hurry."

Eily did not speak. Nervously she turned the parcel round and round between her hands.

"Only for a second."

"I got to get home to my tea. This is washing for Ma."

"You can spare five minutes. Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't be silly. I won't hurt you. A friend of mine asked me to give you a message."

Eily approached the tree, her steps lagging. Seeing that Gillie made no move to touch her, she put down the parcel and seated herself gingerly upon it. "What friend?"

"Vic Tawney."

"I got to go," Eily said, and leaped down as from a red-hot griddle. "I got to."

Gillie put out a swift hand, gripping a red lapel. "Sit down. For the second time, I'm not going to make you up into pies, like Sweeney Todd." She was filled now with a desire to get the business over and done with, for seeing the girl at close quarters had torn away her last rag of doubt. It was ludicrous to think that Tawney could have harmed such a young, tattered and stupid creature. Lord, Gillie thought, I can't let even Vic be worried by this sort of

nonsense. 'I believe,' he had said, with the energy of one who, though having no such belief, desires to force an idea upon another, 'that you can do good for its own sake.' Well, maybe I can. Maybe I will. Aren't I Saint Joan of Arc? She said straightly, "Why are you pretending you're going to have Vic's baby, when you knew he never touched you?"

Eily began to fight, picking at the restraining hand, wrenching herself violently backwards until Gillie said, "You'll only tear your coat. Be quiet."

"Don't you dare hang on to me! You've no right to ask me questions!" She began to weep tears of panic.

"Now come here, silly, and stop snivelling. If you're in trouble, you can do with a bit of help, can't you?"

"He did," Eily gasped, "he did."

"Oh, rubbish. No one would believe that for two ticks."

"It's true."

"Look," Gillie urged, "it's no good sticking to that yarn. Are you even going to *have* a child?"

She was frightened to see the girl's face darken and swell. The flesh rose beneath the wet eyes, making them no more than sequined strips, the mouth was sucked into the quivering chin.

"Eily. Eily. Come here. I want to help you, really I do. I've got a kid of my own."

"My age?" The question was pitiful, temporising.

"Yes," Gillie replied untruly, "just your age. If she was in trouble I'd want to pull her out of it. That's what I want to do for you." She took the lean wrists, gently tugged them.

"I don't know you." Eily showed the whites of her eyes. "I don't trust you. Ma said I should never trust people I don't know."

"A pity you didn't take notice, isn't it? Anyhow, she meant men. Come on, sit by me."

Gillie established Eily Fogg on the tree by her side, put an arm about her. "Look here—— All right, cry, if it'll do you any good." She watched with some satisfaction as the evil flush subsided beneath the unloading of tears, the bones grew sharp again beneath the child's white and flaky cheeks. Now then, take her by surprise; don't go slowly, but go softly.

"Are you like that, Eily?"

The relief was like a draught of cold air in a stifling room; Eily had shaken her head.

"Tell me why you thought so. You did really think so? You weren't pretending so your Ma should make Vic pay?"

"I did think so. I did really. Right up till this morning."

"Well," said Gillie bracingly, "then why aren't you happy?"

"Daren't tell Ma. She'd kill me. I was never scared of her before, but I am now. He gave her a pound, you see."

"Do you love your Ma?"

"No." Eily shivered. "She makes me sick."

"She's a wicked woman," said Gillie. "You know what she was trying to do to Vic? They call it blackmail. She could go to prison."

"I wish they'd put her there."

For a moment, repelled by a hatred that was like a steel fence about the young girl, Gillie understood suddenly that misery observes no conventions. "I wish they would," she said, "for your sake." She added, "Of course it wasn't Vic. Why did you say it was?"

Again the results were better than she had anticipated. "I didn't know the law. I couldn't marry him now, I know, but I was afraid they'd make me when I was old enough. I couldn't bear even to speak to him again."

"You mean the one it really was? Not Vic at all."

"No. The one it really was."

"Who?"

"I won't tell you." Eyes were compressed like buttons, mouth primped as if to an eructation. Then Eily burst out, "It was only the once. I liked him till then. He was a gentleman. He spoke so posh."

A clue. "Tall and dark and handsome?" Gillie asked casually. She knew now that she had won, that the girl, despite her caution, was weakened by relief at finding someone in whom she could confide.

"Fair," Eily mumbled.

One of the soldiers, of course; fair, had a good accent. Sturgess? Unlikely. Not that silly plump one, Berry?

"He'd got a nice figure, I suppose."

No answer.

"Was he tall?"

"Ever so."

Not Berry, not if the girl were speaking accurately.

"He was nice once," Eily said softly, "he's mad about me now, even, only I can't—I can't . . ."

"I know."

"He was so miserable. He said he felt he could always turn to me."

Dakin? Dakin it is, Gillie thought contemptuously. How could he? Too good for the ranks, too refined for the rough soldiers. Hardly ever went in the Lamb. I never did understand how Vic stuck him. She realised that Eily was talking, rambling on like a tormented sleeper.

". . . He was a cut above all of them, different. He missed his home so, and his mother—he loved her. We used to go and walk in Sandley Wood. There was a moon and it was so lovely, like in a dream. At first he only kissed me. We used to sit together, just quiet, on the leaves, only that, and he'd fall asleep with his head in my lap. Once he cried because he was so unhappy and said I was an angel of comfort."

"Did he know how old you were?"

"I told him seventeen."

"Go on."

"Then one night he was extra miserable, and he started loving me more than he ever had before, and wanted me to . . . you know. Because I knew it was wicked I said I wouldn't, but he cried awfully and begged me. I was so sorry for him I could have died. I wish I had died. He kept on saying I was silly, and didn't understand, only if I didn't understand he wasn't going to tell me. And he said something else was wicked, not that at all. And he said if I really wanted to comfort him I would, because it was all right, and——."

Gillie was puzzled; something in Eily's words had escaped her understanding. She said quickly, "Here, go back a bit. 'He said something else was wicked, not that at all.' Not what?"

The whisper was so weak, so ashamed, so wretched that she hardly caught it. "Lying down beside him."

Sitting up, Gillie thrust the girl away from her, and she questioned her straightly. When she knew the answer she

was sick with pity for the pain the child had so ridiculously, so needlessly suffered ; and even now was half-credulous.

" But Eily, you don't mean to say that you thought just lying down beside him—— ? "

" It's in the Bible," Eily said fiercely, " it says so."

" But it doesn't mean that ! He did you no harm. He was far more decent than a thousand other chaps would have been, do you see ? You've been lucky, more lucky than you'll ever know. Do you mean to say you never *knew* ? Didn't the other girls tell you things ? "

" I never went with them much. They were bullies at school and wouldn't let me be with them. When I left I never saw no one but Auntie. And it was in the Bible."

" But you're a country girl." Gillie, no country girl herself, remembered books in which help was afforded to the young by experience of the farmyard. " Surely——"

" I'm not. I come from London."

" Oh, but Eily——"

" Mrs. Eagles, do you mean I haven't been wicked ? " There was in her face such irradiating hope that for a second Gillie saw in her what Dakin must, in his self-torment, have seen : a generous innocence, an eagerness for joy that no evidence of frustration could wholly obliterate.

" No. The only person who's been wicked is your Ma. Didn't she ask you questions ? "

" No."

" Not one ? "

" She's always drunk," said Eily, less as a condemnation than as a statement of fact.

" What time is she sober ? Early evening ? Now ? "

" More so than later."

" Well, then, do you know what to do ? You'll go straight home and tell her what you've told me."

Eily sprang wildly down, spun round and faced Gillie, her fists clenched. " I won't ! I daren't. You've no right to tell me what to do, peeping and prying——"

" If you don't," Gillie said firmly, conscious now of her own goodness so lavishly expended for Tawney's silly sake, " I shall tell Vic to report everything to the Battery Commander, who will tell the police. Your ma will get put in prison, and they'll probably send you to a reform school for helping her."

"No."

"They will. If you do tell, mind, I'll help you; I'll see that you hear no more of it from Vic, and if your ma ill-treats you, you can come straight to me and *I'll* get the police on her." She added, more gently, "There's nothing else you can do, is there? The truth's bound to come out, see?"

The girl was still. She looked at her feet, up at the roof of tossing, creaking boughs. In her face appeared the promise of such strength as she might, out of a ruined youth, salvage for maturity.

Even now, Gillie knew, she was beginning to understand that a miracle had happened to raise her out of hell. "I see . . . a bit."

"Will you do it? Be brave. You'll feel better afterwards."

"I'll try."

"And for Heaven's sake, don't run after the soldiers any more, or you'll find some real trouble. Promise me you won't."

Eily nodded, made a blind gesture of repugnance. Gillie, suddenly tired and sick to death of her, felt she could not bear to protract the interview. The clearing in the wood would always bear the imprint of its ugliness, and its greater sadness. What would happen now? What hope in the world was there for Eily? This new shock could have added nothing to her mental stability. Oh, Lord, I know; I'll feel an idiot, but I'll do it. I'll go and see the Vicar about her, tell him just a little bit. He might get the authorities to take Eily away from Ma Fogg. And besides, old Tenby's always disapproved of me; make him feel a bit silly, won't it, to find me on the side of the angels?

"All right, Eily, get along."

"You walk with me." It was the cry of a child in the dark, the demand for a comforting voice, for a large, familiar, household-smelling, soap-smelling hand to beat back the vague terrors of the night.

Gillie looked down at her, slapped the thin shoulder-blades. "Only to the road, then. I'm not going to the village. Go ahead—you go first. Not room for two of us on this path."

Well, Vic, I couldn't have done better for you, could I?

And what about another of those bangles? Herriot's, in Strethamfold, had one with the allied flags on it in enamels, so pretty.

Sam needn't see.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WEDNESDAY: AFTER BLACKOUT

TOLLER, coming upstairs, met Strutt and Cassilis on the landing. "Come on down. B.C.'s back and wants to see us."

"What, all of us?" Strutt asked him.

"The whole boiling. Soúnds as though something's up."

"Not another row of any description, I hope and I trust," said Cassilis. "What's his mien? Is his brow a blue-piled thunderloft?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, but he looks much the same as usual. Buck up."

"I'll be along in a minute," Strutt said. "I've got to dig some of the grime out of my nails. They're full of machine-oil. Where's the assemblage?"

"B.C.'s room. Never mind your nails; he won't notice."

They went down into the dark and chilly room that served the Battery Commander as a working-place. Cassilis, whose job it had been to assign quarters, had forgotten to select an office, and when he remembered it, had found only one room left to apportion. Cameron-Leckie suffered much there, but it had never yet occurred to him to demand a change.

They were all present; the B.C. at his desk, Elvorden standing before the fire, Glaiden sitting on the window-ledge engaged in making his leg tremble by pressing the ball of his foot against the fender; he watched the result with interest. The B.C. told every one to sit down, so Strutt, who liked his comfort, took the one remaining chair, Toller joined Glaiden on the window-sill, and Cassilis and Elvorden leaned as comfortably as they could against the wall.

Cameron-Leckie breathed on a small brass paper knife and polished it on the blotting-pad. He looked up. "I've been to a C.O.'s conference. You know that."

They assented.

"Brought back some news, quite a bit of it. To start with, Captain Pickering goes up to R.H.Q. as soon as he's fit to take over as Adjutant."

Strutt saw Glaiden drive his weight down upon his foot, so that the plump knee leaped violently. "Oh, good show, sir," Glaiden murmured.

"Very good. In fact, I'd no idea it would happen so soon. It wouldn't have, only Captain Rehan's got a posting to a Scottish regiment and Sherrett, of 'C' Battery, who should have succeeded him, recently volunteered for Airborne. That's what made me late; I went up to the hospital with the news. Glaiden takes on here, of course."

Over Glaiden's round face spread an extraordinary expression, compounded of embarrassment and extreme, dazing pride. He took his foot from the fender, seemed not to know where to put it.

The B.C. looked at him friendlily. "Your third pip will be coming through shortly. Congratulations, Tom."

Glaiden swallowed, looked away. "Thanks very much, sir."

"You've had a two days' start, anyhow; made a good one. And I'm glad to have you."

The others came about Glaiden like wedding-guests about the bride, only Toller offering his felicitations somewhat in the fashion of a disgruntled maid of honour who had herself hoped dimly for orange-blossom.

"We shan't be short-handed much longer," the B.C. continued, when this festive excitement had subsided, "because there's another new man coming to us from O.C.T.U. on Monday. Besides Evans, I mean. I know nothing about him except that his name's Bottome." There was general amusement. "Oh, come, no need to snigger. I expect you'll find him a name of your own before the week's out."

"Though we're not much given to nicknames, are we, sir?" Cassilis said.

"I believe," the B.C. murmured, licking back into place a hair strayed from his moustache, "that the Battery has an incomprehensible one for myself. However"—he squeaked his chair back from the knee-hole of the desk—

"however, that's the least of my news. The big thing is that we're to be mobilised by January 1st."

There was silence.

Instantly Strutt thought of Stacey and the coming baby, repeating to himself over and over again, with a shock of disappointment, I shan't be here when it's born. He glanced round the room at the several faces gleaming through the gauze of cigarette-smoke. At Glaiden's, made blank by a bemusing private satisfaction: he doesn't, Strutt thought, realise anything yet except his own luck, luck he'd almost ceased to hope for. Elvorden's face, young and bare, eyes babyish, mouth half-open. Cassilis's face, mild, urbane, the eyebrows slightly raised. Toller's, very red, the lips thrust forward, the forehead gathered into three sagging pipelines.

Cassilis was the first to speak. "So far as I'm concerned, well and good. Glad to get going."

"Same goes for me, sir," Elvorden said loudly, and with gusto.

Strutt smiled. "For me, yes and no. Yes, I'll be glad to see some movement at last. No, I've got a family."

"Oddly enough," the B.C. remarked, drawing on his blotting-paper a little house with two chimneys and a great deal of smoke, "you and I are the only married men left in a nest of bachelors; we must console each other. Well, now you know. So there's going to be plenty of work for you from henceforward, Glaiden." He half-rose, sat down again. "One or two oddments." He began fiddling once more with the penknife, digging at the soft wood of the desk-top. "Lilley's Court Martial is fixed for Monday week. That means postponing your leave, doesn't it, Cassilis? You were due to go off then."

"Yes, sir. But it doesn't make much odds."

"I see. Good. Well, anyhow, I'll discuss the whole thing with you later. You and Glaiden can see me after dinner to-night. To-morrow we'll have a muster parade; the C.O.'s going to have a blitz on Security, too." Suddenly he shot at them, "Has any one any light to throw on some row with Eagles at the Fleece last night?"

For a moment no one spoke. Elvorden opened his mouth, closed it again. Glaiden began reluctantly, "Well, sir——"

"I overheard some men talking in the street," the B.C. interrupted him. "All I could make out was that somebody

—it was some nickname or other—I gathered it was one of you—had words with Eagles. I can only suppose it was after I left. Now then, who was it ? "

Cassilis, who had moved round to a position behind Strutt's chair, murmured, " Perhaps I was wrong about not going in for nicknames. Sadness, Blanco, Greasy, Tubby, Haw-Haw, the Bull . . ."

" I'm afraid it was I," Elvorden said, heaving himself outwards from the wall into a stance of unnatural rigidity. He was visibly sweating, the water glazing his pink brow.

" Oh," said the Major unpleasantly, " then you're Haw-Haw."

Strutt turned a blurt of laughter into a cough.

" I was there at the time, sir," said Glaiden, " perhaps I——"

" All right, go ahead.—No, you tell me, Elvorden."

" I didn't like some gramophone record they were playing and told the men to take it off. I'm afraid I lost my temper a bit. Eagles stepped in, and said they had as much right to choose the music as I had. That was all." He stared bravely over the ridge of his nose, the hero before the firing-squad. Do not bind my eyes.

" Well, what were you doing——" Cameron-Leckie checked himself. " All right, the rest of you, that's all. Just stay behind a moment, Elvorden, and you, too, Glaiden."

Strutt, Cassilis and Toller went into the ante-room and, to celebrate the diverse shocks, ordered whisky.

" By God," Toller said, " it's come at last. Action. Wonder what it'll be like ? "

Strutt suddenly remembered Glaiden's words : ' Dunkirk bust up my nerve, but another bout of action might restore it. . . . Anyhow, that's what I hope ; but Lord help us, how I dread the prospect of putting it to the test ! '

" I'm glad about Tubby. He's been doing handsomely these last two days."

" Handsome is as handsome goes on doing," Toller said shortly. " Only hope he stays off the drink."

" Do you know," Cassilis looked into his glass, " I think he almost certainly will ?—This embarkation business isn't too funny for you, Strutty ; our one married subaltern."

" Since Lilley left us."

"Lord, yes; Lilley, and all that nastiness to come. What a week this has been! I hope Sadness doesn't start making a full-dress issue of Elvorden's run-in with Sam."

"What is all this?" Toller inquired. "It's the first I've heard of it."

When they had told him he said, "Serve Haw-Haw right. Not that I've any brief for that surly swine Eagles, but young Ives wants a rocket now and then."

"He'll get one, don't you worry. You know what Sadness is like about the need for preserving democracy in the army; it's his King Charles's Head. Not, mark you, that he doesn't keep the political discussion low. Blanco was better where that was concerned. I'm sorry we're losing him."

"I always think Blanco plays for popularity with the men," said Toller, out of disgruntlement with things in general.

Strutt stared at him. "Good God, why? No one less. He never gives them little confidences, or remembers to ask about their home affairs; they like him because they know instinctively he's a good bloke, that's all."

"Oh, all right, all right. Have it your own way. Well, I don't know that I'll be sorry to get out of here."

Strutt thought, No; away from the fret of Gillie, of whom you've lost hope. He thought of the letter in his pocket, a letter received from Stacey at lunch-time.

". . . Don't laugh, but I can't help feeling that having the baby is a sort of Act of Faith. I put the capitals in to take the wind out of your sails—you might think I was serious! (And how right you'd be.) The war seems in such a mess—Rommel in Egypt, Hitler with Stalingrad pretty well in his pocket, the Japs playing old Harry. That's why I feel that if we have a child we're showing that we do believe in an end to the war and a good life after it—the sort of life fit for him to grow up in. (Or Her—take your choice.) I absolutely pray they'll keep you in England, only I daren't count on anything. I feel I'm going to need you so much when he's/she's/it's born. (Trying hard, you see, not to fix my mind on either sex.) But you'll be here, you must be. I love you so. I hope the baby's exactly like you."

Not so good.

He waited until Toller had gone upstairs to wash, then

said to Cassilis, "I'm not feeling too happy; my wife's going to have a baby."

"Is she? Congratulations. But it's lousy for you, going overseas, I mean. I know how I'd feel."

"Perhaps," Strutt said hopefully, "there will be a miracle, and Hitler will commit suicide, and the war will end before we go abroad."

"Maybe," Cassilis answered, with cheer; "a very likely probability, don't you think?" He laughed. "Butterfield! Same again. You, Strutty?—Two more."

"You've never been in love with the army. How do you feel about it?"

"Oh, well, damn it, not much point about being in the army at all if you do no fighting, is there? I mean, if I've got to do this soldiering business I'd rather do it with *panache*. It's so long since I was in civvy street that I'd feel quite disappointed if the war stopped before I'd seen what action was like. Though, of course, I shall be scared pink."

"Oh, so shall I," Strutt agreed seriously.

Elvorden came in, tripping, nonchalant, and very shaken. "Oh, well," he said loudly, "that's that." He looked sidelong from Cassilis to Strutt. "B.C.'s ideas about keeping every one happy. Wrap the men in cotton-wool and don't hurt their feelings, bless 'em all. I suppose I was a bit of an ass, though."

"An ass plus," said Cassilis.

"Why, what do you know about it?"

"Heard the whole story."

"Who from?"

"You pays your money and you takes your choice."

"It's none of your damned business, anyway."

"It's your business not to make the mess look silly." Cassilis yawned and rose. "You're the respect wallah, aren't you? If you want respect from the men you mustn't push and shove them. Coming, Strutty?"

"Look here——" Elvorden began. He subsided, began to work a drop of spilled whisky into his own initials.

Glaiden came in.

"All hail!" said Cassilis. "Congratulations again, Glaiden; we're delighted."

"Thanks."

"Damn pleased," Strutt agreed. "Well, what about the sea trip?"

Glaiden smiled as if he saw horizons, and between himself and them a belt of blue over which the foam ran freshly. "Don't dare to hope for France, do we?" he said. "I could fight like a lion if I could just once more set eyes on a Dubonnet sign."

Sam said, for a moment diverting the conversation, "Dubonnet, and the last we're likely to get," putting it behind a row of bottles in the cupboard where he kept specialities. Turning, he wiped his dusty hands on his thighs, passed his fingers through his thinning hair and looked at Gillie, who sat on the edge of the table, impatiently swinging her legs. He added mildly, "I'm just telling you. I'm not making a fuss."

"It's your foul way of making a fuss," she retorted, glowering. The lamps in the lounge and in the small room behind the bar were not fully lit, as it was too early to expect much custom. A half-light was not, as to so many women, becoming to Gillie, for it seemed to rob her, who was at her best in brilliant illumination, of some light of her own. Her skin seemed dull, her eyes without lustre, the semi-circular hollows in her throat exaggerated to the point of caricature. Even her remarkable hair, pushed carelessly back into a fuzz behind her tiny, lobeless ears, was toned to a greenish-bronze, unlacquered.

"Now, now," he said, clearing a shelf for glasses, "you've had your run; I'm not talking about that. You've been the Leading Lady, you've been Lady Di-*arna*. You've had Toller on a string. But the point is, you've had about enough. I saw that young gaby Elvorden trying to paw you last night."

"He was only playing the fool. Anyhow, he'd had too much to drink."

"He'd not had much."

She glanced at him through her drooped lashes. "I don't know what you're grousing about. You don't want me, and it's not my fault if there are people who do."

"That's true," said Sam thoughtfully, "I don't want you."

She shivered with rage. "Sam——"

"Shut up, someone's coming in." It was a local farmer. "Hallo, Ern," Sam called, passing from the back room into the bar, "be with you in a tick." He retreated, opened the door into the hallway and shouted for Lucy. "Carry on in the bar for ten minutes, will you?" He returned to Gillie. "You know, you may think you're high and mighty, but my old mother wasn't unlettered. She used to go to Shakespeare plays, and come home and reel off lines of them by heart. I remember hearing her tell dad about one of them—it was when I was eight or nine. There was a girl going to be married, and when she got to church the bridegroom wouldn't have her, because he said she'd been going with men. And he told her father not to give him 'a rotten orange.' . . . That stuck. Don't know why, but it's funny how things do. A rotten orange." He smiled. "Not bad, eh, Gill?"

"All right," she said, eyeing him from head to foot as if to demonstrate that no fixed glance could assimilate so much flesh, "and what are you going to do?"

"Do? Now, that's something. I can think of things I'll do to that pup, though, if he comes in here again. Or if I catch you meeting him round by All Saints."

Starting up, she knocked over a glass with her elbow.

"Lucy," said Sam, poking his head through the hatch, "Mrs. Eagles has broken a glass. Get a broom, will you? I'll carry on."

Ten minutes or so later, when, having served the customers, he came back for a moment into the room, Gillie gripped the lapels of his coat and would not let him go. "How did you know?"

"Now, now, now," said Sam, with something that gruesomely resembled good-humour, "you should be more careful walking with young men in the moonlight, especially Miss Webbe's way. I met her out this afternoon and she mentioned, so careless like, that she'd seen you with one of the officers, the youngest one, and wasn't it nice for a young woman like you to have company?"

"I didn't arrange to meet him. It just happened so."

"Maybe. I don't care. But don't do it again, see? Or you mayn't like the caring I'll do."

She said fiercely, a ginger kitten aroused, spitting, claws out of the whitened tufts, "Believe what you like, but I'm

seeing Vic Tawney to-night and I'm seeing him in private."

"Tawney? The chap who gave you that bangle you lied about?"

"I don't care a damn for Tawney."

"Then you won't want to see him."

"I shall. I'm doing something to help him—a mess he's got into with some girl; and I'm going to take him into the back parlour and tell him how things stand. If you want to, you can listen at the door, or behind the curtain, if you can pack your stomach in; but you can't stop me."

"Joke," said Sam, "very funny. You helping any one. Oh, no, you're not making a worse fool of me than you've made already. What will the bar think when they see you leading Tawney off, like we was a funny house? Oh, no."

"Look," she said, "you can tell him *you* want to see him. You do that. Will you?"

"Why, no!" he grinned broadly.

"Sam, please. I needn't have told you, need I? I could have sneaked off?"

"You're just up to some new trick. Always something new with you: never know what to expect." He picked her hands from his coat, forcing them up finger by finger, and went to attend to custom.

It was hot in the NAAFI. Sidney Mangan and some friends were standing in the street outside, breathing the sharp and star-scented air.

"I remember some Christmasses," said Mangan, continuing a conversation, "before the war, down Battersea way, in the old Duke of Bronte. Wonderful. There was a horse-trough outside, and you know, by the time the pub was closed and we was all shoved out to our dinners, we'd piled it high with bodies. Oh, I tell you! But we was decent. We used to let the water out first, before the fun started."

"And I remember one Christmas Eve up in Preston," Toffit reminisced, "when we smashed up the bar and the police got called in, only then old Joe—he was the Guv'nor, and what a character he was!—old Joe wouldn't make any charges because of the season being what it was, and said it wasn't him that called the cops. I don't believe it was, neither. It was more likely some silly little bit of a girl

that got the wind up. But did we have to pay Joe for the mess!"

"I was on leave Christmas last year," said Scott, "but it wasn't what it used to be."

"I'll be on leave this." Cray looked up at the Bethlehem stars, and he smiled. "My kid's up in the air about it already. He asked the wife if his dad was coming down the chimney."

"Never mind," Mangan cheered him, "war'll be over by the Christmas after this one."

"I wouldn't say so," Toffit gloomily rejoined, "ten years more, that's what it'll be."

"Ooh, know what that is? That's defeatist talk, causing alarm and despondency. You'll get run in. No, you wait till the Yanks get going, and then you'll see something."

"Got to wait till any one gets going," Toffit grumbled. "A deadlock, that's what it is. You can have deadlocks going on for years and years."

A ray of light shone out from the Fleece, a brush-stroke of honey-yellow on the moonlit stones. Gillie Eagles came out, a coat thrown over her shoulders, and she raced over the road to the men.

"Any one know where Tawney is?"

Mangan stared at her. "Not me. Sorry."

"Well, doesn't anybody know? Is he in the Lamb?"

They glanced inquiry one to the other. "Couldn't say," said Toffit at last. "Want me to go and look for you?"

She hesitated. "Thanks. I'd be grateful."

While he was gone she drew a little apart from the soldiers and stood tapping her spindle heels on the pavement's edge.

"Last I saw of him," Cray murmured, "he went into Yew Cottage. Lord knows what he's up to."

Mangan clicked his teeth. "Why the hell didn't you say?—Here, Mrs. Eagles! Tawney went into Ma Fogg's."

She swung round. "When?"

"About twenty minutes ago," Cray told her. "I saw him when I was going along to the NAAFI."

"Is he still there?"

He shrugged, transmitting the shrug to the others. Gillie glanced towards the Fleece, moved back a little into the dark of the wall. Toffit returned from the Lamb. "Not there."

"Oh. Well, thanks all the same. Thanks, Fred." She stood quite still, only her eyes active."

The soldiers, not certain what to do, troubled by some vague idea that it would be tactless to stay yet discourteous to go, continued their talk in undertones, spontaneity lost. After a few moments Mangan interrupted them. "Any one coming for a beer?"

"No beer money to-night," said Cray.

"Nor me," Scott agreed, "but it's getting a bit parky out here. I'm going indoors."

"Come on, Fred, have a beer on me."

"Don't mind if I do." They accorded Gillie a hesitant salute, left her alone.

She walked swiftly, furtively, along the street to the rickety cottage. It was an ugly structure, square, slate-roofed, the walls hidden by a mass of ivy that, with its powerful suckers, was little by little loosening the brick-work. Around the front window was a rim of sallow light. Shall I knock? With what excuse, though, if he shouldn't be there? Not going to run myself into trouble, have that drunken hag abusing me right and left. She touched her hand to the latch of the gate. Go in?

I bet Sam's wild. I bet he's steaming. But he can't get out, he daren't come after me, not with the bar so full. Thank God Lucy's a fool with the change, has to count on her fingers.

Tawney said, "Gillie!"

He had approached her from behind, had come from the lane leading to the men's billets.

"Oh, I'm so glad it's you! I've been looking for you everywhere. They told me you were at Ma Fogg's. What did she say?"

"She was out. Have you seen Eily?"

"Yes. And it's all right."

He gazed like a lip-reader at her mouth.

"All right?"

"Yes. Look, Vic, I can't stop; Sam told me I wasn't to go out, so I just walked out under his nose when he was too busy to follow me. You can threaten the old woman with the police if you want to: Eily's not expecting."

"Gillie, you can't possibly mean——?"

"Yes, I do, you fool. And your pal Dakin would have

been the guilty party if there had ever been a guilty party. She wasn't even "—taken by some alien delicacy, she flushed for words—" no one had touched her. Not that she knew that. She doesn't know anything." She laughed in his stiffened face. " Oh, don't look like that ! If you could see yourself ! I can't go into it all now, but I've done what you wanted."

" I don't understand. I——"

" You don't have to understand. Go and give Ma Fogg hell ; you're safe. And I think she knows you are by now, which is why she's not in. Eily was going to tell her the truth, I made her promise she would. Vic——"

" What is it ? " He was still dazed, his tongue heavy in his mouth.

" I said I didn't want anything for services rendered. That was silly of me, wasn't it ? "

" You can have whatever you like."

" Two things. One, to see the back of you. I'm tired of playing nursemaid, and Sam's suddenly decided he wants to make trouble. Two, I want another bracelet. There's one in Herriot's, at Strethamfold, a gold chain with little flags——"

" Oh, Gillie," said Tawney. The street was, for the moment, deserted. He took her hands, turned them outwards and kissed the palms. " I'd give you the world if they'd sell it me. When can you tell me the details ? "

" I don't know. When there's an opportunity. Oh, Lord help us ! "

" What ? "

" Sam." She darted away across the road, her feet clacking on the stones. She ran into Sam's bulk, pushed against it like the skeleton in the Goya *capricchio* who strains to uphold the heeling slab of stone. He put his arm about her, but in no loving fashion, thrust her down the side alley of the Fleece and in at the back door.

" Sam," said Gillie, gasping in the darkness, " Sam, don't be an idiot. You're hurting. Let me go, will you ? " She felt his weight upon her pressing her to the wall, knew his warmth like an eiderdown, stifling, unendurably heavy. Ducking, he rasped his bristled cheek deliberately against hers. She gave a cry of apprehension, of fear at the unknown.

"Oh, shut up," said Sam, releasing her, "and get back to the bar."

Tom Berry was sitting in the dark, the chilly, private bar of the Lamb. He was thinking deeply, but not about the original subject towards which he had proposed to direct his thoughts. He had meant to finish his poem, setting no word of it upon paper until he could copy the whole thing from the manuscript illuminated in his mind; yet somehow his thoughts had strayed from composition, had accepted the work as complete, and were creating a scene in which he, Tom, fiery comet in the sky of poetry, the famous author of *Suddenly there was no news*, took vengeance upon his old enemy, Godfrey Prout. Not that Tom had ever met Godfrey; but the latter, editor of the short-lived but respected literary monthly *Pretension*, an elderly young man who spent the winters in Hampstead and the summers at Goring-on-Thames, where he owned a bungalow named, with ironic fantasy, Chez Swann, had twice returned Tom's poems with a bare rejection slip. Not that there was anything intrinsically evil in returning a poem; but Godfrey was known all over London for the witty personal scrawls with which he embellished these slips, and to send one untouched by his pen was open insult.

This scene of Tom's imagining was set in post-war days. Tom had found the capital to start a monthly of his own; and this, after the appearance of the first two numbers, had taken precedence of all similar publications. Indeed, to have work accepted by it meant that a writer was Made. Tom, sitting behind his desk in a small, sunny room with blond walls and curtains of almond silk, a room hanging like an eagle's nest above the seas of London, slit an envelope with a small crystal paper knife and drew out a poem by Godfrey Prout, with accompanying note. 'My dear Berry,' it said, delicately casual—'This is only a slight thing, but I fancy it might be up your street; anyhow, I hope so. How are you these days? What about dinner with me Friday next, at the Café Royal, if you've nothing better to do?'

Tom folded the paper slowly and slipped it into his pocket. He glanced at the poem, and his lip curled; he could almost see its rosy convolutions, the complex arabesque

of its contempt. Oh, Miss Harris (Hillyard, Horrocks, Hemmingway, Hammerstein)! he called, Bring me a largish envelope, will you? When she had brought it, her patent leather feet making no sound upon the carpet's pasture, he put the poem into it and raked his pocket for a rejection slip; but Tom was not crude. It was not the regulation slip. This was printed red on buff, and it read: *Messrs. Tolefree regret to inform you that due to the shrinkable nature of the material they cannot undertake to dye the enclosed garment.*

Smiling a little, he gave the envelope to Miss Harris. Pop that in the post right away, will you? There's a good girl.

And afterwards he lay back in his chair, thumbs in the armholes of his viridian pullover; and he smiled, still smiled (ironically, yet strangely without malice, as though he had gently chidden a naughty child) through the smoke of his Balkan Sobranie.

A smack upon his unprotected back sent him lurching forward over the desk that had become a table, sent the smoke of the cigarette that had become a ten-for-ninepence Virginia into his lungs; hurled him out of his bureaucratic heaven, out of the sun, out of the smoke-smelling, leather-smelling, ink-smelling air, down and down and down into a little dark Christenhurst bar-parlour where a young soldier was bouncing on the tips of his toes and smiling like a negro.

"You've done it, have a drink," said Victor Tawney; "you've saved me, it's all cleared up, though I can't understand it all yet, you've done it. I can't thank you enough; have a drink!"

"What have I done?" Tom mumbled, blinking.

"The Eily business! You told me to get a woman to talk to her, and I did. I got Gillie Eagles. What are you having? Have a large Scotch."

Tom fitted his bones into the familiar niche of reality.

"What, it's not you? She admits it's not?"

"It's not anybody. It's just not so."

"Well, I'm damned," said Tom. Fragments of the vision were still clouding his mind, littered over it like little wisps of cotton wool. He hardly noticed Tawney go out, hardly saw him return; and suddenly upon the table were two glasses brimmed with burning gold.

"Well, good luck," Tom murmured, "and glad if I've been of any help."

Tawney ran excitably on, telling his tale, speculating, constructing the possible incidents of Gillie's triumph.

"Obviously you won't have Ma Fogg pinched," Tom remarked, "it would only make a filthy mess and do no one any good. But you'll scare her silly, I hope?"

Tawney shook his head. "I'm doing nothing except talk to Eily, and that I must do." He rose. "I'll go right away, and hope to God Ma isn't back."

Tom put a restraining hand on his arm. He left the room, tiptoed across the passage and peered very gingerly through a hatchway that gave on to the public bar where the local people drank. "You needn't worry," he said, when he came back, "she's in there."

"What's she doing?"

"Sitting right in a corner, sort of tucked away, and not talking to any one. She's pretty drunk, I think."

"O.K." Tawney was all energy, a jack-in-the-box. He fetched two more whiskies, put them in front of Tom, drank down his own. "Those are for you. Sorry I can't stay, but I must be quick."

"Here, I can't let you——"

"Nothing I could do for you would be too much, understand?" Tawney's tone was almost savage. "You're all *right*, Berry."

"So are you," said Tom, paying a vague and embarrassed compliment. He had risen; now he re-seated himself, put one glass before him, moved the other across the table. That's Godfrey Prout's glass.

The scene changed; behind the drinkers was red plush, above them mirrors adorned with garlands and with spilling cornucopia of faded gold. Drink up, old man, said Godfrey Prout, Drink up, do . . . I was wondering if you couldn't see your way to printing my essay on Sacher-Masoch; of course I know it's not frightfully significant, but it does, I think, break new ground. Tom said, Yes, I meant to talk to you about that. (Tom smiling; Tom wise, perhaps a little ironic, but always kindly, and firm in his integrity.) I don't like to disappoint you, but we do feel that it's just a little—as you yourself have just hinted—on the shallow

side, and as we do aim to tap a rather more thoughtful public. . . .

"Don't be afraid, Eily," said Tawney, his eyes gentle as an animal's, "let me come in." She was peering at him through a two-inch crack, holding the door fast against her toe. "Come on," he coaxed, "I know all about it, or pretty well. I won't hurt you. And I'm not angry."

The door sprang wide as she released it, as she backed away to the far wall. Tawney stepped into the room which, though still hideous, still sour, was no longer filled with nightmare. Or not with his own nightmare. Sitting down, he called Eily to him. At once she came. She was calm, dry-eyed, without hope.

"I didn't know," she said, but as though she had no interest in his belief or disbelief.

"I know you made a mistake. All the same, you did know it wasn't me."

"I thought you were nice," she said simply, "I thought they might make me marry someone when I was old enough, and I'd rather have had you."

Her innocence touched and appalled him. "But Eily, didn't you realise what would have happened to me if——" He paused. "No, you didn't. You couldn't have realised." She stood before him like a patient child awaiting the teacher's dismissal. He patted her shoulder, rose from the chair. "All right, I'm going." Taking a pound note from his pocket, he gave it to her. "I brought this along earlier this evening to keep your mother quiet for an hour longer, but she wasn't in. You take it, and don't let her know."

Dumbly she accepted it. There was nothing in her face of pleasure or of sorrow. Half-fascinated, he took a further ten shillings from his wallet and put it into her hand. She crumpled it with the other, her acceptance mindless as a monkey's.

When he left her she did not even raise her head, or give the slightest sign that she had observed his going.

The first wildness of his relief from the suspense of the past few days was succeeded now by a feeling of great peace, a desire to be by himself. He walked slowly along the street and up the hill towards the gun park, his head empty of

curiosity. He no longer wished to hear the details of Gillie's interview with Eily, wished nothing but to forget everything that had passed. Indeed, he could no longer feel pity for the child, though during the days of fear this emotion had dominated even his terror. I'm for myself now, he thought vaguely, I've had a miraculous escape and I'm going to make myself more fit for miracles. Work hard. Take a stripe, if ever they offer it again. Plug away at the job, borrow books on gunnery. Dig myself out from this syrup of apathy; syrup everywhere, in my boots, under my puttees, crawling up to my armpits. One good heave, and out I go.

The weald of steely blue beneath the moon's radiance, the light striking silver from chalk and slate, from the million surfaces of the glossy leaves. Somewhere a night bird was crying, a monotonous, sorrowful and human note three times repeated, and again three times. And again: Tawney counted. Then fill up your glasses as quick as you can And sprinkle the table with buttons and bran, Put cats in the coffee and mice in the tea, and welcome Queen Alice with thirty times three. A marching song. He felt peaceful and light. Dig myself out to-morrow, make a fresh start.

A voice called faintly across the weald of his mind, clear and monotonous as the nightbird: He'll never do it all by himself.

Never, never all by himself.

His peace deserted him; or if he were still at peace, the happiness had drained away from it. Best get an early night.

He walked slowly back to the billet, where he found Dakin unpacking his kit.

"Why, hullo!"

"Hullo, Vic."

"Didn't expect to see you so soon. Nothing wrong, is there?" (Expecting him to say, My mother's dead. But if she were, he'd hardly be here.)

"Didn't expect myself back so soon. When I got home I found they weren't going to operate after all, so I'd no reason for sticking around."

"Is she better?"

"Well, yes; only I'll never know now when it'll all happen again."

"I'm sorry. But perhaps it won't happen at all?"

"God knows. May, may not. What's the time?"

Tawney looked at his watch. "Ten to nine."

"Oh. Well, I'm going round to the NAAFI before it shuts. I'm hungry. Coming?"

"No. I'm tired."

They looked at each other, and between them some curious hostility flashed out, dying before either could apprehend it. Dakin turned, bent down in front of a small, flawed mirror and ran a comb through the narrow furrows of his hair. He put on his cap. "So long, then."

"So long. Glad things are more or less all right."

Alone, lying in bed, Tawney marvelled at himself that he could take such pleasure in the thought of hurting.—Because someone's got to pay for what I've been through, and it's going to be Chris. He's going to hear the story; the only one besides Gillie whom I shall ever tell, unless . . . unless I tell Charmian some day.

Charmian. He saw her image in the dark, an image mirroring the world that had once been his. I can ask you out now, ask you with a free and a happy conscience: will you come? Of course you will. You would come if I were field marshal, general, captain, quartermaster, sergeant or sanitary orderly; it would be all the same to you. When a lot of things have happened, when Gillie's out of my blood and her fevers are spent, when I've dug myself out of the syrup, and when you, perhaps, have grown just a little older, I expect I shall fall in love with you.

For a tall girl you have such little hands; I noticed that at once.

In his pillow a full orchestra was tuning up. Move his head which way he might, he could not escape the noise of the instruments.

"A phone call for you," said Mrs. Mills to Menhenheott, "from London."

"London?" He put down his glass. "Get away!"

"Better hurry up; they're holding on. You know where the phone is?"

"O.K., thanks." He went into the narrow, dark and draughty recess in the passage between the private bar and

the kitchen. He guessed, even though the event had no precedent, who was calling him. "Hullo."

Her voice was tiny and clear, a mouse's squeak. "Ron! Is that you, Ron!"

"Hullo, Maudie. What's cooking?"

"Oh, it is so wonderful to hear your voice! You can't think how worried I've been. I've been feeling awful, darling, just awful."

"What the heck about?"

"What *about*?" She paused, to indicate displeasure at the tone of his query. "You, of course. Oh, why don't you write? You know what I wrote you about!"

"Look," he temporised, feeling a coldness in his spine, as if a door had suddenly been opened, "letters take a time. Yours to me sometimes take three days to get here."

"Yes," she countered acutely, "but have you written at all? That's what I want to know. Is there a letter on the way?"

"I've been busy——" he began.

Her voice was shrill with fear. "Ron, be straight with me! We are going to get married at Christmas, aren't we?"

Somehow he could not realise that it was Maud, pretty Maud, fiery and meek all in a moment, to whom he was speaking. No. He was speaking into a wooden box that had in it some mechanical talking device. "Sorry, I didn't catch the last part. The line's bad."

"I said, We are going to get married at Christmas, aren't we?"

"Well, look, old girl, I'm sorry; but it can't be done."

"Why? Why not? Oh, do be straight! You're frightening me. I've always been straight with you, haven't I? Always trusted you?"

"I can't," said Menhenheott to the talking machine, "not so early."

"Why not?"

"I don't believe in it, not in marrying while the war's on. And we agreed not to."

"Ron, do you still love me? You've got to tell me."

"That's all right," he said.

"Ron, do you, do you? You must tell me. I'll go mad."

"Can't, over the phone."

"Are there people with you? I can't hear anybody."

"Can't say much on the phone. I'll write."

"You listen to me, then!" Her voice changed, grew hard with insistence. "You've got to be reasonable. We love each other, don't we? Well, then, we don't have to wait. I can live with Mum and you can stay with us when you're on leave. She likes you so much. She thinks of you as her own son, she's always saying so."

"Look," he said, "I might be going abroad."

For a moment she was silent. Then—"What do you mean? You *are* going? When?"

"I don't mean for sure. I don't know when. It might be any time."

"But don't you see, that makes it all the more important for us to get married?" Now she was the business-woman, the one to make arrangements. Practical. Eminently reasonable. "I'd have your allowance, and keeping on at my job I'd manage fine and be able to save for when you got back. Oh, Ron, darling, don't be unkind. You don't know how I love you, you don't know——"

"Well, I'm not getting married at Christmas," he said.

There was a long, breathing silence. At last she said, her voice thickened by tears and anger, "If you don't, then it's never. I'm telling you. I'm warning you. It's now or never."

"All right," Menhenheott answered, having a mental picture of the voice as half a dozen shapes of metal strung together with wire, "it's never."

The operator spoke. "Do you want another three minutes?"

"No, thanks. Good-bye, Maudie."

He hung up the receiver too quickly to hear her words, and he walked, wondering, light-headed, back into the bar.

"All right?" Mrs. Mills inquired.

"All right, thanks. I say—if they ring up again, tell them I've just gone."

"You've just gone," she repeated, round-eyed.

He pushed through the crowd at the dart-board, wiped the slate and called for challengers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THURSDAY MORNING

FELSE came radiant into the Sergeants' Mess, hand-rubbing, brow-twitching, bluff King Hal in a pint-pot.

"Well," he demanded, "what about the news, eh?"

He was not, had never been popular; but at this moment every one in the room, understanding his delight at the prospect of an enforced separation from his wife's flailing tongue, was in sympathy with him.

"Sort of shock," said Stonor, Toller's troop sergeant. "Never got half a hint, did we?"

"Funny thing was——" Menhenheott began, and stopped. There was no need now to tell any one of his application.

"Funny thing was what?" Felse took up his tea and drank it while it steamed, displaying no sort of discomfort at its boiling passage down his throat.

"Nothing. Or only that I was saying to somebody only yesterday that so far as I could see, I'd get through the war without even killing a pussy-cat."

"What's funny about that? It's something lots of chaps was beginning to think. 'Yo-ho, my lads, yo-ho,'" Felse trolled, in a jocund bass, "'yo-ho, my lads, yo-ho'—I hope you're all good sailors."

"Wonder where we're going?" Stonor mused, "wish it was back to France. I liked France."

"Cor, so did I!" Felse saw, not the engulfing terror, not the retreat, not the bloodshed and the fire of the beaches, but the village bars, the zinc counters, the advertisements—Byrrh, Dubonnet, La Jouvence de l'Abbé Soury, Mieux Vaut le Mandarin que le Medecin. He saw the girls in their dark dresses, walking like beauties whether they were beautiful or not. "Had the time of my life. Continental Sunday, what?"

"I wouldn't mind seeing the East," said Menhenheott, "going where it's hot. I like hot weather. I'd like to see India, if France is out."

"Elvorden was born in India. He told me so."

"That's what makes him think we're blacks," said Stonor. "Who's taking over Glaiden's troop?"

"Cassilis. He'll have to do some work for a change," Felse grinned. "He doesn't half look sick about it."

"Cassilis is all right," said Menhenheott, "I always liked him. You can trust him."

"Trust him not to make a muck-up, perhaps, but not making muck-ups isn't everything," Felse remarked wisely. He stretched himself. "Do I feel good?—Hullo, Quarter."

Alf Conway came with his comfortable, lurching stride into the mess. "Hullo, Tod. Packing your traps for the journey? Don't forget your stays and your hair-net." He leaned over the counter. "Any cocoa going?"

There was none.

"All right. That swill will do. Well, lads, how do you all feel? Shaking in your shoes?"

"It's O.K. by me," Menhenheott yawned, "earlier the better."

"Got no wife, got no kids," Stonor said, "got no responsibilities. I'll see the world whenever they like to pay my passage. I bet it's Egypt."

"Have a nice camel-ride out there," Conway told him, "chase the girls round and round the sphinx. Have to watch the fleas, though." His eyes grew glassy with yearning. "Not that you can beat Morocco for fleas. Big ones, with sort of special ways, intelligent as dogs. I could tell you some things. F'rinstance, about the day when Corporal O'Grady went to see the fleas of La Mere Bijou, as she was called. . . ."

Menhenheott put down his empty cup, tidily wiped away a few drops of tea spilled by Stonor on the table. "Got to push. So long."

He went out into the street. Cameron-Leckie, passing, stopped and spoke to him. "Oh, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir?"

The B.C. smiled. "I take it you want nothing further done about your application? I'm afraid no one will get you overseas faster than you'll get there with us."

"No, sir. Thank you. Sorry I bothered you with it, things turning out as they have."

"You weren't to know. It came as a complete surprise to me, I can tell you." Cameron-Leckie paused and snuffed at the morning air. A white opacity shut the village away from the ring of hills; above it, through a blossom of mist,

the sun shone round and red and solid as an orange. "Lovely morning."

"Lovely, sir."

"Never notice England much till you know you're going to leave it. I know I never did. Real English weather, isn't it? Never get this anywhere else in the world."

"I wouldn't know, sir. Isle of Wight's been my limit up till now."

"How do you feel about going? But of course you're pleased. What you wanted. Now, of course, we're all speculating 'where?'; and we won't be told, you may be sure. Any preferences?"

"I know where I hope it is, sir, but I don't think it will be. France. I wish we could get at them direct, go right across and let Hitler have it."

"One of the Calais-Dover enthusiasts?" the Major murmured. "Well, well, I expect it will come in due time. Mustn't be impatient."

"No, sir." Menhenheott's face tightened.

"So I'll just destroy your application, shall I? All right." The B.C. started to move away, turned suddenly back. "If there's any sort of trouble, Sergeant—trouble at home, anything like that—I hope it clears up for you. If I can help, let me know. If I could straighten matters out in any way . . ."

"Thank you, sir. But there's nothing."

The B.C. returned Menhenheott's salute and strolled off towards the Battery Office.

He's all right, the sergeant thought; a good chap. Tried to help. Fancy me telling him about Phyl and Maudie! Feel bad about Maudie, always shall, and it's not finished yet, if I know her; but I'm not going back. Made my escape and I'll keep running. I shall know I'm a scab for the rest of my life, but I'll have Phyl to make up for it. Better be a scab with Phyl than a hero with Maudie. Yes, fancy telling Sadness the ins and outs of that! A good chap.

"But 'Calais-Dover' . . .!"

Tawney watched Dakin who, a picture of stricken misery, was sitting solitary at a draughty table near the door of the NAAFI.

Impossible, after all, to tell him, to make him pay for

my weakness, my past horrors. He's in hell now, all by himself, fighting for the courage to pretend he doesn't care about overseas one way or another. I watched his face while the B.C. was telling us, saw the yellowness spread across his skin like oil on the surface of the water. He's afraid. And the damnable thing about it is that he'll go on being afraid for months more; while we're preparing to go, while we're at sea, and while we're waiting for action; when that begins, either he'll have no room in his mind for fear, or fear will drown him.

Curious thing, fear. Some men are afraid of the physical, of pain, of death. I'm not, or not particularly. At any rate, I can't imagine either sufficiently to fear it. But my own dread is acute as theirs; my dread of public disgrace, and the death of contempt. Take fellows who desert rather than join a draft. They're called cowards. Cowards! It would be the height of bravery in me to refuse to join it. I'm far more afraid of the Court Martial than of the fighting. They're far more afraid of the fighting than of the Court Martial. A matter of temperament. Look at Mother, when I was home during the November blitz of 1940. She was sick with fear of the guns and the German planes droning over, but when I jumped sky high because an ugly brute of a spider ran across the rug in front of me, she picked it up in her hand and put it out of the window. I would rather have sat through a dozen air raids than have done what she did. She used to laugh at me when I was a baby because I feared fast-running insects, would explain to me how beautiful they were, how ingenious, how industrious, how very harmless! But it did no good. Then again, Dad is frightened of doctors. 'I'd rather die than be butchered by that damned sawbones. . . .' Meaning, I'd rather die under my own steam.

"Here," Tawney said to Nellie Hatteras, "give me another tea." He brought the cup to Dakin, set it down before him. "A present from Santa Claus. Drink it up while it's hot, as my grandmother used so irritatingly to urge me every single bloody tea-time."

"Oh. Thanks."

"What's up? Feeling rotten?"

"Nothing's up."

"So I see."

"Oh, shut up," said Dakin, "and leave me alone."

"Bad for you. Now, come on, buck up. You haven't had any bad news about your mother?"

"No."

"Sick about us going? I wouldn't blame you. It must be hell for you."

"I don't care if I go or stay."

In another minute, Tawney thought, I shall tell you, I shall tell you.

Down, devil. Kennel up.

"Cigarette." He rolled it across the table.

"Thanks," said Dakin. He lit it. "Sorry if I'm a crab, but I suppose I do feel a bit low. The thought of leaving Mother, especially when her health's so funny——"

"I know. Still, it's a good way off yet. Got to be ready by January 1st, certainly, but God alone knows how long we'll hang about before we do go. Some units have had to wait a hell of a time."

Sidney Mangan came to their table, straddled his legs before it and declared, "Oh, we're hanging Ay-dolf Hitler in the morning!—Old Fred's party piece. Rarin' to go, Tawney?"

"Not rarin', and not particularly reluctant. You?"

Mangan's bravado dwindled a little. Sitting down, he folded his big raw hands on the checkered cloth. "Oh, 'comsy comsar,' as the French say. The old wife was so glad when I got back from Dunkirk, it'll about kill her when she knows I'm shoving off again. Otherwise, I don't much mind. What we're here for, isn't it? Sooner started, soonest finished, I suppose." He began to croon, in a soft and nasal voice:

> "'Why did ye skedaddle from me and the child?
> Johnny, I hardly knew ye.'"

The orderly bombardier came into the NAAFI, stood in the doorway looking about him. "Tawney! Mr. Glaiden wants to see you in the Battery Office right away. Says it's urgent."

"Wants to see me?" He frowned. "All right. I'll be over." He flicked Dakin's shoulder. "See you later." He went out.

The tall woman in red, her big hawk's nose jutting over her blond furs, her hair built into a structure of convoluted curls above her resolute face, stared across the desk at the Colonel, who eased his chair an inch or so farther away. Her eyes, duck-egg blue between brackets of mascara, held his and were unwinking. She crossed and recrossed her legs, upon which were stockings so fine that the tiny veins were visible, the mapping of a few dark hairs.

"You shouldn't have come, Mrs. Lilley," he protested at last. "I'm afraid it's hardly in order for you to see your husband."

Still holding his gaze, she snapped open her bag and took out a letter. "I had this this morning, telling me he's been transferred to headquarters. Read it, if you like; that's all he said. Not another word. I was worried out of my mind, so I came right down. You can't keep me from seeing him. It's inhuman." Her inhuman stare seemed to deepen a little in colour. She held out the sheet to him, and when he made no move to take it dropped it on the desk, tapping it with her rust-coloured finger nails.

"Mrs. Lilley," said Humphrey Brackett, "this puts me in a most difficult position. I needn't tell you how extremely sorry I am for you, but——"

"I must see my husband. Yesterday morning I had a letter from him telling me about the trouble he was in. We hadn't been on good terms for some time, and he asked me about a divorce. That's why I've got to see him."

"It's not in order," he repeated, but with less conviction. She waited silently, and he fidgeted beneath the limelight of her gaze. He said, "Very well, I'll arrange it."

"Thank you." Her voice was impatient.

"But I can't permit an interview of more than half an hour."

"Half an hour will do." She arose. "Now?"

"If you'll wait just a few minutes, please——" He stretched out his hand to the bell.

"Listen," she said swiftly, "just a second. Only a second. Is there any hope for him? Any hope he'll get off?"

"I can't discuss the matter with you, Mrs. Lilley. I'm sorry, but I can't. I can only assure you that any circumstances in his favour will be taken into full account."

She touched her tongue to the sides of her mouth. She

had made up her lips carelessly, leaving the colour in a dry streak along their outer contours. "Didn't you ever feel you wanted to hit someone," she said breathlessly, "and only just managed not to? Would it have taken too much to make you do it and not only think about it?"

He made a sound of protest.

"You know what it means," she said, "you know what it means to his life."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lilley. I told you I couldn't discuss it. So far as I'm concerned, I—you—I understand your feelings. I can't tell you how deeply I regret this whole affair, for you, for myself, for the regiment . . ." He added quickly, "If you'll excuse me," and went out.

In a moment or so, an orderly came in to conduct her up a flight of stairs and along a passage to a small, cold, featureless room, where there was an armchair, a kitchen chair and a table strewn with one or two periodicals. She stood by the window watching the progress of an army convoy through Strethamfold, the sun making the faces of the despatch riders as fiery as its own. After a while footsteps sounded along the boards of the corridor and Lilley came in. He shut the door, stood with his back to it.

"Hullo, Bunty."

"Hullo."

"I didn't ask you to come."

"Oh, I thought I'd get a nice welcome," she retorted bitterly. She came to the table, flung her gloves and handbag on to it and sat down on the kitchen chair. "I suppose I can smoke in this damned morgue?"

"Go ahead. They can always stop you."

"Want one?"

"No, thanks."

She said, "How are you, Bert?"

He shrugged. "Oh, splendid. Don't I look it?" There were purplish stains about his eyes, and the colour seemed to have drained from beneath his first skin, giving his normal ruddiness the appearance of paint.

She noticed his strapped wrist. "What have you done to yourself?"

"We had a bomb at Christenhurst, just before I left, and I got it cut by glass. Pity it didn't cut my head off, isn't it?"

She made no reply.

"I wonder Brackett let you see me."

"He didn't want to."

"Well, I didn't tell you to come."

She made a gesture of irritation. "Anyhow, I'm here. Of course I got your lovely letters. The first one was specially encouraging. I suppose you thought that giving me a filthy shock wasn't bad enough; you had to be beastly as well."

"How's Fossdyck?"

"All right."

"I suppose he's delighted to hear about me. Or doesn't he want you, now that I've disgraced the family name?"

"You're making it very easy," she said. She glanced sidelong at him through adhesive lashes. "As a matter of fact, I haven't set eyes on Ralph since Friday last."

"Too bad. You're looking pretty good to-day, Bunty. All dressed up like a sore finger. New hat?"

"No."

"My mistake. Yes, you're a good-looking woman. Even if Fossdyck does let you down, you can always find a little friend somewhere, can't you?"

"Oh, shut up and sit down. You get on my nerves, standing about like that."

He obeyed her, relaxing into the armchair as if he were deathly tired. "No good saying I'm sorry, Bunty. Sorry for you, I mean. You always said I'd turn out rotten, and it looks as if you're right. Funny, too; the regiment's going abroad in the New Year. Remember how I used to say I'd sell my soul to be kept in England; looks as though all my dreams are going to come true. They'll sail without me. I'll be . . ." He hesitated. "I suppose they'll be glad enough to have me in a factory. If I'm only dismissed, of course, they'll call me up again in the ranks."

"And now you'd sell your soul to go abroad with the regiment, wouldn't you?" she murmured curiously. "Well, well. Life is strange. You'd better tell me why you hit Cassilis."

He told the story in grotesque imitation of a child repeating a lesson. "So you see, teacher, I've been a very bad little boy."

She was silent.

"Better start faking some evidence," said Lilley, "and I'll start proceedings. That's what you came for, wasn't it?"

"Do you want me to say so?" she flashed.

"I don't give a damn what you say. You'd better be getting along, too. If you don't catch the twelve-forty train you'll have to wait till five o'clock and there's nothing to amuse you in this town."

"Good God," she said slowly, "I believe you've been crying. Have you? I never knew you do that."

He looked away. "Rub it in."

"I'm not rubbing anything in. You are a fool, Bert."

"I told you that." He got up. "Why don't you push off? We've nothing more to talk about."

She rose with him; she was taller by a couple of inches than he. From the mess next door came the sudden noise of music.

"Heaven,
I'm in Heaven,
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak."

"Remember?" said Lilley; "we used to dance to that when we were engaged."

They recalled an overheated night-club underground, so small that only half a dozen couples could take the floor without crowding it, the walls plastered with the covers of French magazines, patches of damp staining the gilded ceiling.

She murmured, "We had our good times."

"I expect you'll have some more."

"Shall I?" She wandered round the table, took up a copy of *Punch* and flicked through it. "I've chucked Fossdyck."

He looked sharply at her, then away again. "More fool you. Why?"

"Didn't want him, that's all."

"When did you do it?"

"He went up to Manchester on Friday, on a job. I wrote him yesterday saying I was through and wasn't going to see him when he came back." She paused. He gazed at a picture on the wall. February Fill-dyke. "Oh, don't be an idiot, Bert!" she cried in sudden, startling anger, "do

you seriously think I'm going to walk out on you now ? "

He said unsteadily, still avoiding her gaze, " You don't mean that." She saw the back of his neck redden, the little hairs glimmer against the freckled flesh.

" Oh, you don't give me credit for any decency, I know. Most women, after getting that foul letter of yours, would have let you choke. I suppose I'm soft."

He turned and came towards her, dazed by weakness and by the shock of her words. " Why ? "

" Why what ? "

" Why aren't you getting out ? Here's your chance. You've been fed up with me long enough, God knows. If you do stick to me you'll have all your friends pitying you."

" I'm sick of our old crowd, anyhow. I shan't be seeing them. Bert—when's it to be ? "

" Monday week."

" Any hope of them letting you off ? "

" No."

" Do you have a lawyer ? "

" A lieutenant here is acting for my defence. He was a solicitor in civvy street."

" What will happen ? "

" If I'm dismissed the service, I'll be called up again almost at once. If I'm cashiered——"

" That's worse ? "

" It finishes me." He added, " You'd better look around for a life of your own."

" I'm staying."

" Why ? "

" Oh, I know what you are," she said slowly. " I've had four years of you. But during that time I've got pretty well used to you, and as you say, we had our fun once. Besides——"

" Besides what ? "

" You'll want help. You'll want me around, won't you ? " For the first time since their meeting she was herself hesitant, unsure of him as he of her.

" I'm not asking for a packet of pity," said Lilley.

Sitting down, she stretched her hand palm upwards across the table. He looked at it. After a moment or so he returned to his chair, put out his own hand and touched hers.

"I suppose I still care about you, in a way," she said. "I suppose that's the long and short of it."

Lilley moved his chair nearer to hers, took both her hands and put them to his cheeks. He could not speak.

"It'll be all right," she told him in her hard, confident voice, speaking rather more loudly than usual, as if she wished to impress something of great importance upon a deaf person, "hold on and try not to upset yourself, and it'll be all right. I'm with you. I'll be thinking of you. We can get over this, just as we used to get over lots of things. I'm with you. I'm here.

"It will be all right."

"Enemy aircraft dropped bombs on a South Coast town last night. Houses were damaged and there were a small number of casualties, some of them fatal."

Pickering, having heard all he wanted of the one o'clock news, returned to his book.

"Enjoy your dinner?" a nurse smiled at him, as she bent down to straighten the bedclothes.

"I wouldn't exactly say 'enjoy,'" he replied after some thought, "but I didn't find it disagreeable. I never was fond of rice pudding, though."

"Confidentially," she whispered, "I can't stand it myself. But don't tell anybody; we have to sell patients the idea." She moved away down the shining floor, as starched and white as a yacht upon the bay.

Glaiden came into the ward, made for Pickering's bed.

"Hullo, Tom. Congratulations. Can't say how pleased I am."

"Thanks. I'm still recovering from the shock. How are you this morning?"

"I'm all right, apart from being a bit bored. Well, what's the latest news? Who's taking your troop over, Cassilis?"

"Yes. There are two new men coming on Monday—but you knew that."

"How did every one take the news of the overseas business?"

"On the whole, pretty cheerfully. Felse is cockahoop, because it means getting away from his wife. The Quarter's pleased because he's an old soldier anyhow, and gets restless."

" You know," Pickering said, " damned if I don't believe half those stories of his are true."

" Oh, tripe. But look—I've got some more news for you. Tawney's had the hell of a tragedy. Did you hear, on the wireless, about a raid on the south coast last night ? Well, that was Brittonmouth. His mother and father were staying with his uncle, who's got a place on the cliffs. House received a direct hit, and Tawney's father, uncle and cousin—the uncle's son—were killed. His mother and the three servants escaped, because at the time the bomb fell Mrs. Tawney had gone down to the kitchen to give instructions of some sort."

Pickering was aghast. " Oh, God, what a thing to happen ! Was the mother hurt at all ? "

" No. It was she who telephoned this morning. She got a message through from the post office to the Battery Office asking us to prepare Tawney for the shock. He's gone off to her now ; she's staying at an hotel there. Funny thing was how he took it ; I had the job of telling him, and he just thanked me rather dismally as if I'd given him news that his pet guinea-pig had died. Honestly, you wouldn't have guessed——"

Pickering interrupted him. " Wait a minute, Tom ; I'm thinking." He remembered Tawney inviting him to inspect his uncle's Rousseau collection, remembered his own surprise at the conjunction of the words " Rousseau " and " Britton-mouth." " Do you know what that makes Tawney ?—Or so I believe."

" No. What ? I don't know what you mean."

" It makes him Lord Cambeck. Don't laugh in the presence of death," he added, half-laughing himself, " it does. Now piece this together. His father's Kenrick Tawney, the essayist. Kenrick's brother is Evelyn Montagu Tawney, first Baron Cambeck ; barony created after the last war for ' services to art,' but it's really a political title. He was in the diplomatic corps for some years, and when he retired he did some big job reorganising the Primrose League. I know about him simply because he's got one of the best private collections of painting in the country and far away the best collection of the Douanier Rousseau. When Tawney mentioned the collection to me I jumped to who his uncle was, so I looked the old man up in *Who's Who*. He

had one son, Edgell, who was in the R.A.F., I believe, and so far as I can make out, our Tawney succeeds to the title."

Glaiden whistled. "It's Edgell who's been killed, then, poor cuss."

"Obviously."

"So the gunner," Glaiden murmured imaginatively, "turned into a beautiful prince, and they all lived happily ever after. He said nothing about it to us."

"Be a bit curious when he gets back. I wonder what the lads will say? Do they love a lord?"

"Tease the eyebrows off him for a while, I suppose, or anyhow, when the first instinct to be pleasant to the bereaved has passed off a little. Generally speaking, I should say they dislike a lord on principle. However, they do like Tawney. They despise him a bit for his laziness and they think he's a little mad, but they like him."

Pickering smiled. "I suppose the newspapers are busy digging up a story and pestering his relations for old snapshots."

"I suppose so. Well, look here, I must be getting back." He glanced up. "Hullo, visitor for you—smiling at you, anyhow."

Pickering saw Helena advancing, bold in nutbrown furs, a splendid and rather alarming hat of amber felt set slantwise on her bleached hair.

"Cheero, old boy," said Glaiden, backing across the ward so that he could make his exit without meeting her.

"Cheerio.—Helena, what a surprise!"

"Tried to tell me it wasn't visiting hours. What nonsense! Yes, I am a surprise, aren't I?" She smiled like a prima donna upon the other patients, who were gazing at her open-mouthed, and then forgot them. Stooping, she kissed him.

"Don't sit on the bed," Pickering said, "you fidget me. Have the chair."

She spread herself over it, furs cascading to the floor. "You'll never guess where I lunched."

"Of course I won't. Where?"

"Up on the hill, with Mr. and Mrs. Geogehan. Claud, what's the matter with your ear?"

"Good Lord, do you know them?"

"My dear, only just! Dan and I met Mrs. Geogehan at

the Reavers' last night, and you can imagine how amazed I was when I learned that she lived here ! I told her about you, how you were in hospital, and she begged me to come back with her to-day as her husband had the car."

"And what was he doing wasting petrol ? "

"Now you *don't* know the circumstances," said Helena severely, "so you shouldn't judge. He's allowed to use it for business."

"What business ? "

"Now, Claud, you don't peep and pry into people's affairs. She's an exceedingly nice woman——"

"She is not," he retorted, "she's loathed down here. Never does a thing for the lads, though the gun-park's up in her grounds and she sees them daily. She walks through them like Alice through the looking-glass, recognising no impediments."

"Oh, well, she must be over sixty," said Helena, without regard for the *non sequitur*. She added demurely, dropping her brown lids, "Perhaps she is a bit of a horror. But you don't quarrel with your bread and butter ; it isn't civilised."

"What bread and butter ? "

"Quarrel with a nice ride, then. Don't pick me up, Claud."

"Are you staying over night ? "

"No, I can't. Dan's got some wretched dinner to-night for a pack of tobacco merchants. How are you ? "

"Fine, thank you, Helena. My shoulder's mending, anyhow, though I'll never have a complete left ear again. You're well, as I can see. How's Charmian ? "

"You know," she remarked, "it would have been so absurd to be hit by a bomb just at this stage in the war. I said so to Dan. We really felt terrible when we heard you were safe."

He laughed at her.

"You're ridiculous," she rebuked him. "I meant, when we realised what might have happened. Charmian ? Oh, she's well, and in very good spirits. They think their hearts are broken, and they find they've knit up again. Just as young bones heal quickly when children break them." She added, sharply, suspiciously, "Who's this Tawney ? "

He said, "There are cigarettes in that locker if you care

to fish for them. You can light one for me, too, while you're about it."

"Why, may one smoke in here?"

"During certain hours."

Taking out the packet, she put two cigarettes in her mouth, lit both and passed one to him. "Who's this Tawney, I said?"

"One of the lads. Why?"

She caught the flash of amusement in his eyes. "So you know something about it, do you? Did she meet him here?"

"At the dance, yes. Has she been talking about him?"

"I asked her if she'd met any one interesting. She said, 'Oh, yes and no. There was one rather nice man I danced with.' Then again, when she came home from seeing you, she said something about Tawney. I asked her who he was and she answered, 'The man I danced with last Saturday. I told you.' Not another word could I get out of her. Aren't young girls sly? I suppose I was, at her age."

"I think you were most probably brazen," he answered, teasing her in the manner she usually enjoyed.

"Who is he?" Helena asked, not to be deflected.

She had become a dragon-mother, a fire-breathing guardian of the tower. As I was, so shall not you be. The fiercest of mothers, Pickering thought, were in their time the wildest girls. He recalled a picture of Helena at eighteen, a proud, plump, bold-eyed girl penned bodily, but not in spirit, within the prison of whalebone and lacings, her hair fuzzed out beneath a rose-trimmed hat, a short, tight plait of it arranged to fall over one shoulder into a nest of gauze and violets.

"Tawney? I told you. Just one of the men."

"What do you mean by that? An officer?"

"No. Not even a non-com. A gunner."

"Why did you let her dance with him?" Helena demanded.

"Why shouldn't I? You're a dreadful snob."

"I'm certainly not, as you should know"—her grin of reminiscence was involuntary—"but I have to consider Dan. What's he like?"

"Dan," said Pickering, "is too fat."

She beat her fist on the bedclothes. "Claud! You know quite well who I mean."

"Tawney is lanky, exceptionally good-looking, and, all in all, a decent lad. You ought to thank your stars something's happened to stop her pining for MacGregor."

"He's quite ordinary, I suppose?"

Though he understood her perfectly, he pretended he had not. "Oh, no, you could hardly say that. Quite extraordinary in some ways."

"In what way? Surely you wouldn't have Charm marry any rag-tag-and-bobtail——"

"You're being absurd, Helena."

"I'm a realist," she replied grandly.

"Do you suppose her father would have minded? After all, she's his child, not Dan's."

"Ah, Dicky," she murmured, and grew momentarily tearful. She had her sentiments.

"Anyhow, do stop thinking Charmian's going to marry every boy to whom she takes a fancy. We pester the young too much with our damned intimations of maturity. Did you marry all the lads who fell in love with you?"

"You needn't bait the hook with such fat worms," said Helena briskly, "I'm too old to snap."

"Well, there's no need for you to worry about Tawney socially." He smiled, knowing a secret. "In fact——"

"In fact what?"

"Never mind. You'll see."

"Claud," said Helena, "please stop playing cat and mouse with me."

"I'm very ill," he replied, "and when you're ill you're privileged. I shall go right on playing cat and mouse. Only I am a little sorry, I admit, that your snobbery is going to be fed in so fairy-tale a fashion. What a lucky woman you are! Everything goes your way. Watch the papers."

"What?"

"The papers. You'll see."

The nurse was advancing purposefully down the ward.

"Helena," he said, "you must go now, because if you don't, you'll be thrown out. They're coming to put a screen round me."

He smiled at her with affection. "Thank you for coming, bless you. Tell Mrs. Geogehan I hope she falls into her own ornamental pond and swallows a goldfish. Good-bye."

Helena arose, wrathful, tremendous, her hat a little askew. "You've got to tell me."

"I'm *afraid* time's up," said the nurse, in a voice of such regret that one might have fancied her sorry to make the announcement. "Now, Captain Pickering——"

Victor Tawney sat in the fusty and crowded carriage of a train travelling to the coast. On his right a W.A.A.F. was reading *War and Peace*, on his left a young sailor slept soundly, his head bobbling from side to side with the motion of the train. Opposite, a woman was holding a sleeping baby, a Canadian soldier was doing a crossword puzzle, and two elderly men in civilian clothes were sharing some badly-made sandwiches.

Tawney, smoking steadily, adding a greater opacity to the violet air, was thinking how curious were his own thoughts. Clichés came easily to his mind: stunned by the shock, dazed by the suddenness, too shocked to realise. Yes, I suppose I don't realise. Dad's gone, and Uncle Eve, and poor old Edgell. I liked Edgell, though Mother said he was a fool. Dad's gone and Uncle Eve and poor old Edgell. The words shaped themselves to the music of the wheels.

Long ago, when I was seven or eight, Edgell and I went out sea-fishing without asking permission. We stopped out till six o'clock. It was a fine evening, and the sea was like mauve silk. When we came ashore we were too scared to go home, so we stayed away till nearly eight. Then we tried to sneak in without any one hearing, climbing over the garden gate (I can remember the hot smell of the laurels), but Uncle Eve came out and hauled us into the study, where Mother and Aunt Lukie were waiting with faces like doom. Uncle Eve lammed Edgell, but I was kept over till father came in. Edgell roared so much I thought he was half-murdered, so when it came to my turn I roared like sin too, just to make him feel easy. When we got up to bed I found Edgell hadn't been hurt either, but had yelled just as a matter of form, so I biffed him for making me cry when it hadn't been necessary.

"Got a match?" said the Canadian, leaning across the carriage.

"Here you are."

"Thanks."

Yes, and the day when we stuck a cucumber into the sleeve of Dad's shirt, went down to the kitchens and put it through the mangle. There was hell and tommy after that, too.

Funny, but I can't feel anything yet, no pain; and I liked Dad. The only thing that worries me is what the men are going to think when I get back with that tomfool title. That's the maddest part. I never thought in a month of Sundays that this could happen. Never that Edgell would hand it to me.

The wheels repeated:

Never that Edgell would hand it to me.

What the devil shall I do? I shan't want Uncle Eve's London place after the war, and even if any of his pictures have been saved from the Brittonmouth wreck I don't know enough about them to make them a life's work. I suppose I could lend them to the National or the Tate; wherever one does lend pictures. I suppose we'd sell up the house. Wonder what Mother feels? But of course, she can't feel anything yet. Like me, can't feel anything. The Viceregal; that's where she said she was, that awful red place on Cantley Cliff. Dread the moment of meeting. (Mary, her competence blurred by tears, her arms outstretched—Oh, Vic, Oh, Vic!)

Not that it's Mother's job to take the decisions. That's mine. I'm going to take them all from now on.

He listened, his inward ear straining for the inward voice, silver-clear; but no voice came. No voice said, He'll never do it all by himself. He'll never, never do it all by himself.

Suddenly he was taken by a feeling of such high joy that he could hardly recognise the emotion for the fright it spontaneously aroused. I must be mad. Stark, staring, crazy mad.

But still joy, joy like a sun melting the prison walls, revealing to the captive that he has only to stretch out his arms and he will be free, his finger-tips in space. Mother and Dad between them could hold me down, could make me afraid to move or speak, afraid to realise my own knowledge, to put down that twice two was four lest, by some black miracle, it should on that occasion be five. She held me no less than he; but alone she cannot touch me.

He knew that he would never hear the voice again, that in time he would no longer remember the words it had spoken.

The last mists had melted, and the sun was blinding on a sudden loop of sea perceived through a gap in the south downs. Oh, God, help me, Tawney prayed, but I must stop being happy. Happy!

Free.

The Canadian, bored by the insularity of his fellow-travellers and determined to infuse a little liveliness into them before the journey's end began, with friendly aggressiveness, to sing, leaning back with folded arms against the cushion, his clouded gaze upon the ceiling.

"Home, home on the range,
Where the deer and the antelope play . . .
Where seldom is heard
A discouraging word . . ."

I must stop being happy before I meet mother, Tawney thought in panic, I really have got to stop.

". . . And the skies are not cloudy all day."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THURSDAY: CONCLUSION

THE SUN sank into grey ash, withdrawing from Christen-hurst walls and pavings the ruddy incandescence that had been all day within them. It had not at any time succeeded, even at noon, in dispersing the fogs entirely; and now, with its setting, they rose up like the waters in a river lock, sealing the village in their muffling folds. The sound of the men's singing as they came, twenty or thirty of them, back from a route-march, was like the singing of a legion centuries away, a foreign legion that had tramped out the roads of England.

Nellie Hatteras, laughing with her civilian outside the NAAFI, heard her own mirth rebound from the wall of the mist, unable to pierce it.

Mrs. Piggot pulled down her blinds before there was need, telling a customer that she never could stand gloom.

"I'm afraid it will be thick to-night," said the Reverend Arthur Tenby to Mrs. Eagles, as he peered from the vicarage porch into the sulphurous murk of the lane. "Still, we mustn't complain. We've had very little rain this autumn."

"You will see what you can do?" Gillie urged. She was feeling exceptionally good, yet mingled with this feeling was a shade of delight that she should have put the vicar at a disadvantage. Looked down his nose at me, did he? And now he finds me concerning myself with Eily Fogg's morals.

"I shall try," he answered, "you may rest assured; but it's very difficult. Very, very difficult. We are so powerless. However, I will speak to the girl to-morrow."

"Well, good-night, anyway. I know you'll do your best." As powerless as a caterpillar on the end of a finger.

"I must say," he added, with obvious reluctance, "that I do appreciate your telling me. It was a right thing to do. But a very distressing story; if you'd only tell me the name of the soldier concerned, I could at least——"

"Can't do that," said Gillie firmly. "Have to have his permission, and he'd never give it. No; the thing's over and done with now, but your job's to try and get the poor little wretch away from that frightful mother. Isn't there any law that can help that her?"

"Certainly I shall speak to Eileen; but you realise that you tie my hands?"

"Sorry, but I can't help that. All I really wanted was for you to know. In case of any future trouble." Smiling, she stepped out into the lane. "Good-night, vicar."

As she walked back to the Fleece she laughed to herself. Poor old Tenby, how he stared at me when his niece let me in! But if I'd put on less make-up than usual just to call on him it would have been hypocrisy, wouldn't it? Like disguising myself as something I wasn't.

I wonder what I am?

And I wonder if Sam's back. Why did he want to see Louisa to-day?—Rushing off like that and leaving me with the bar on my hands. She paused on her way across the bridge to look down at the white mist coiling over the surface of the water, the sound of which was so distorted by the atmosphere that the stream might have been running, con-

trary to the laws of gravity, like a crystal ribbon through the upper air.

Then she saw a van draw up outside the Fleece, Hawbuck's removal van from Strethamfold. What the devil is that doing here? She ran to it, saw Sam and Hawbuck's looby boy come round to the back, unbar the doors and let down the tailboard. Jumping up, the boy handed a child's cot to Sam, who set it on the pavement and stood ready to receive a perambulator, a bath and a roll of clothes and bedding.

"What do you think you're doing?" Gillie demanded, arms akimbo like a virago in a farce.

"You'll see, all in good time. Steady on, Joe! Easy." He gripped a blue-painted high chair and put it with the other things.

"That the lot, guv'nor?"

"That's all. Thanks very much."

Joe sprang down. Sam walked with him round the van, opened the driving doors. "Gillie! You can take this."

She saw the pasty little boy dumped like a big doll before the wheel, mackintosh pilch hanging round one leg, mouth daubed with chocolate. He quacked, "Ma-má!"

"Sam, are you crazy? You can't do this!"

"Mike's come home," he said jovially, "come home for good." He groped for the baby, dragged him out, kissed him and thrust him like a bundle of washing into Gillie's arms. "Thanks, Joe. Here's for yourself."

Grinning, Joe took the half-crown. "Thanks, guv'. All set?"

"All set. Good-night."

"Good-night." The boy let out the clutch, edged the van round and roared it out of Christenhurst.

"Ma-má," said Michael. He twisted his hand in her hair, the colour of which had always fascinated him, bobbed his damp mouth against her cheek.

Sam went indoors, Gillie following.

"Look here, I don't know what you're playing at, but we've nothing ready for that kid! Nothing for him to eat, no hot water yet for his bath, no room for his cot——."

"We'll make room. Go and clear the bedroom, put a light to the boiler and send Lucy out to help me."

"I won't have Mike——"

"Mike's staying. I've told Louie so."

"Sup-pa!" said Michael. He began to grizzle. Gillie vaguely kissed his hand, raked up the pilch and stuffed the loose ends back into his knickers. "Is he hungry, then, my pet, and is he glad to be home?—I could about kill you, Sam."

"You'd like to," he replied, over his shoulder, "but you'd find it hard."

Furious, but not, as she told the child, with him, she went out into the kitchen. "Lucy! Go and help Mr. Eagles in with the nursery stuff and help him get them upstairs. Lump them in my bedroom—I'll tidy things up afterwards."

"Little sweety puddeny-pie," said Lucy, big-eyed, poking Michael's chest, "who's my lovely?"

"Hurry up, will you?" Gillie hung her son over one arm, went to the biscuit tin and found him a ginger-nut. She put him in the chair with it, gave him a cup of milk and lit the boiler. "Oh, damn Sam, damn him, damn him."

"Dam," Michael repeated, blowing biscuit from his mouth, spilling milk down the front of his coat, "Sam dam sam dam."

"Shut up, Mike! Don't say that."

"Sup-pa," he urged her angrily.

"Yes, yes, I'll put on your milk. You'll have to wait. Cornflakes suit you? Because they're quickest. Look at me, I haven't even taken my things off."

When the milk had boiled she poured it over the cereal, placed the dish on the window-sill till it had cooled and took Michael on her knee to feed him. He was a little sick.

"Chocolate," she said contemptuously, "just like your fool father to stuff you with chocolate when he knows it brings you out in spots."

Sam came in and shut the door.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well what?"

"We can't have that boy here, you selfish devil. You know I haven't time to look after him properly."

"You'll have time from now on. Hawbuck's eldest boy—not Joe, of course—is coming to help in the evenings. He's T.B., so he's no good for the army. I can handle the morning trade on my own."

"I think you're mad."

"No. I was, but I'm not now." He picked up the child, raised him to his own great height and nuzzled his face. "Sleepy? Mamma put you to bed soon."

"It isn't even aired."

"Oh, yes it is. Lucy's doing that. If I was you," Sam added, gazing critically at his son, "I'd just give him a lick-and-spit to-night. He won't want a bath. He's about done in."

"All because of your selfishness!"

Sam smiled confidingly at her, nipped her arm just above the elbow. "Now, now, Gillie, don't try that silly stuff on again. It's your wings he clips, and I know it. Serves you right. Don't you like him, though?"

"I love my child," she replied splendidly, "that's why I don't want him in this place!"

He shrugged, and handed Michael back to her. He took an evening paper from his pocket. "Pity you didn't run off with young Tawney. Much better than Toller."

"I've told you, I've no interest in Tawney."

"Heard what's happened to him?"

"No. And I don't care."

"His father, uncle and cousin were killed in a raid on the south coast last night. He's gone off to be with his mother."

She was too surly to express surprise. "Has he?"

Michael, unutterably weary, heeled over in her arms. His eyes closed. His sweet, triangular mouth, blueish with milk, fell open, and he slept.

"Better look at this." Sam spread the paper across the table.

She gave it a casual glance, then caught her breath. There was a picture of Tawney, an old, stiff and staring photograph taken when he was in his last term at school, the Adam's apple conspicuous above the stiff collar. She read, ". . . his nephew, Mr. Victor Tawney, now a gunner in the Royal Artillery, succeeds to the title. The new Lord Cairnbeck was educated at Westminster, and afterwards . . ." There followed an undistinguished record.

In rage and bitterness she remembered the fantasy she had wrought about herself and Elvorden. Yes. And I could have had Tawney till the day I died. Ives, however mad he'd been about me, would never have asked me to marry

him, but Vic . . . I could have been Lady Cambeck. I actually could have been Lady Cambeck. Me.

Lady Gillian Cambeck.

Or : Gillian, Lady Cambeck. (Whichever is right.)

Left alone here now, for ever in this backwater, while the world washes past me. For ever alone. Hitler never missed the bus as I've missed it.

" How absurd," she said, and pushed the paper over the edge of the table on to the floor. Rising, she carried Michael upstairs, undressed him, washed his hands and his sleeping face and put him to bed.

Then, with an effort to quieten herself, she looked down upon him as he lay, alien as a frog in a bird's nest, in all the clutter of her room. Lucy had pushed back the bedside table to make room for the cot, had set the bath on the dressing-table stool. On the shelf by the window, perfumes, rouge-boxes and face-creams had been displaced in favour of his soap, his talcum-powder, his vaseline. Michael was home.

Not a pretty baby ; too sallow, too like Sam about the lower part of the face. Yet he looks rather sweet when he sleeps. Most babies do.

(Gillian, Lady Cambeck.)

I wish I could feel towards him as I felt during the first week, when I knew that if anything happened to him I couldn't bear it, I should go mad. The first time I carried him out in my arms I said to Louisa, 'Take him, quick, or I shall throw him into the river.' She said, 'You silly, why ever should you want to do that ?' and I answered, 'Because he's too much for any one to have—I don't want to be responsible for anything *worth so much.*'

(When I saw Lady " Gillie " Cambeck in the Berkeley Grill to-day she was wearing one of those new satchel handbags. . . .)

And now, I love no one. That's the worst of all things, and the loneliest ; to love no one. It doesn't matter who loves you. If you have no love for any one you are deadly miserable, and everything is as dry and dusty as the grave.

Mechanically she cleared the bath from the stool, sat down at the dressing-table and made up her face for the evening. Be running up and down again the whole time to see if Mike's all right. Sam thinks that mothers ought to go tearing up and down. You're callous if you don't.

She watched the passage of the rose-red comb, a present from Toller (though Sam did not know that), through her hair. The golden wires sprang from it, glistening in the dim light. Shan't even be able to have a decent light to dress by, if Mike's going to be here. I wonder what Louisa thought?

When she came downstairs she found that Sam had laid the supper and was boiling up some coffee left over from the previous evening. They ate, for the most part, in silence. She asked him what Louisa had said about the removal of Michael, and he replied, "She said she could understand your wanting him."

At half-past six they went into the bar, where Lucy had been serving the few early customers, and by seven it was full.

"Poor old Tawney," Cassilis said to her, "I'll bet he hoped to keep this business quiet." He jerked his head towards a table at the end of the room, around which a crowd of men had gathered to look at an evening paper. "Have you seen it?"

"Yes," she replied shortly. She added, "I think the men are rather ghoulish. It's a dreadful tragedy for him."

"It's natural instinct," said Strutt. "We've had quite a week of it one way and another, haven't we, Cass?"

Gillie's ears, sharpened by years of serving in the magpie chatter of the bar, caught a whisper not intended for them. She had been pouring bottled ale, the glass well slanted, the amber flow steady. Now she started, inadvertantly slopping a great foaming head on to the beer.

"You're going abroad?" she said sharply to Toller, who was nearest to her.

There was an awkward silence, the men grinning, laughing a little, glancing from one to another.

"Secret," Toller mumbled, "No careless talk. Get us into trouble."

She flushed, and was bold. "You lads should be more careful if you don't want things to leak out. You really are leaving? Why? When?"

"'But who knows
Where or when?'"

Cassilis surprisingly sang, in an agreeable tenor. He added, "Now, shush! Mrs. Eagles. You'll get us into an awful mess, really you will."

She jerked her brows upwards, blew out her lips. "Not my fault. What's yours?" she asked loudly to Dakin, who was dancing his glass on the wood, and the life of the bar flowed on, obliterating her indiscretion as the sea obliterates a hole in the sand.

The sense of loneliness that had so chilled her as she stood by the sleeping baby, re-awoke. She pushed the ale along to Dakin, rang up the change with an air of virtuosity. "Sorry I've let out all the military secrets," she murmured to Toller, as she took his order.

Sam burst past her to get a bottle from a high shelf.

"Don't suppose much harm's done. Anyway, we don't know the precise time, and we certainly won't be told the place." Toller's eyes were desperate. They said, I've got to see you alone.

Just perceptibly, she shook her head.

"What a world," said Gillie, aloud and bitterly. Her shoulders drooped.

Glaiden whistled, and she looked up.

"Don't be downhearted," he urged her, "the darkest hour always comes before the dawn, if I may coin a phrase. What are you having?"

"Nice of you, and I won't say no. A light ale."

"Sure? Same for me, then."

"You haven't heard the news to-day, have you?" Cassilis asked her. She was bewildered, afraid he was attempting to bait her. He continued, smiling, "You don't know that Captain Pickering's been made Adjutant and Mr. Glaiden's our new B.K."

"Why, Tom!" she exclaimed, widening her eyes in the manner of an admired screen actress, "Congratulations. Here's to you."

"Thanks. And to you."

She laughed, her spirits rising. There would, no doubt, be men to replace them. "You ought to be drinking lemonade. Aren't you on the wagon?"

"I think I told you. Two half pints *per diem*."

"He means it, too," said Strutt.

Still she looked at Glaiden, thereby escaping Toller's

taurine gaze. "I'll have to start respecting you now, shan't I?"

"Respect," he replied gravely, "should come from the heart."

"She respects us all," said Strutt, inclined to be playful now that he knew he had but to suffer her for two months or so longer.

"All equally," Gillie answered him. She looked round the room. "No one want a tune to-night? What are we so quiet for?"

"Curiously enough," Cassilis said, "I believe—reverting to the question of respect—that the lads are showing some obscure delicacy in connection with Tawney."

"But he's not here."

"No. All the same——"

She blew out her lips, glanced warily at Sam. "Well, they could at least play *The Lost Chord*. It would be rather more suitable to-night than last night."

Strutt moved away with Glaiden towards the fire. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "she really is a disgusting woman. One doesn't always realise it, but she is." Taken by an impulse, he stood on the edge of the fender, his back to the fire; and throwing himself back a little, managed to catch the pink statuette with his shoulder-blade and send it into the hearth, where it cracked into six pieces and a mess of powder. "Oh, Mrs. Eagles," he shouted, "I'm so sorry!"

Gillie ducked beneath the bar, came furiously towards him. "I should think you would be! It was a wedding-present."

Mangan, slipping quietly forward under cover of the excitement, filched one of the plaster breasts and slipped it, as a souvenir, into his pocket.

"I'm desolated," said Strutt, with stylish firmness. "How much?"

Gillie crooned over the remains. "I don't want any money. It can't be replaced. I do think you might take more care what you're doing, Mr. Strutt!" She was near to tears.

"'Oh, what a naughty boy was that,'" Cassilis whispered, "'to try and drown poor pussy-cat!' Bad show, Strutty."

"You *might* take care," she repeated, fumbling in the

hearth for the pieces and attempting to fit them together, " it's quite gone. I'll never get one like it again. I do think it's a rotten thing to do, damaging other people's property."

" Gillie," said Sam distinctly, " stop grizzling over that pink thing. Mr. Strutt couldn't help it. Done us a good turn if you ask me."

" Oh, look here," said Strutt, " I'll do my best to buy another."

" You'll do no such thing, sir." Sam was stentorian. " The damn statue was always dangerous, stuck where it was. Gillie, come and serve customers, will you ? "

She rose from her knees. As she pushed her way back through the soldiers Toller thrust a piece of paper into her hand. She was unable to look at it for a while, but at last, when every one had been served, she retreated into the back-room and read the note.

" For the last time, leave Sam and marry me. It can't be till the war's over now, because divorce takes time, but you must marry me then. I can't live without you."

She scribbled on the back of it, " For the first and last time, go to hell. That's all over," and succeeded in slipping it back to him fifteen minutes later with his change.

She saw him read it, saw him whiten. He crossed the room, threw the paper into the fire, took up his cap and went out.

" That's that," said Gillie to herself. Looking in the strip of mirror between two bottles, one red, one green, she saw the tears in her own eyes. He had no right to smash my statue. People should be more careful.

" Don't go in there," said Toffit, clutching at Menhenheott as the latter proceeded, with Phyllis Ricks, towards the private bar, " Haw-Haw's in residence, as they say. He mustn't go in the Fleece any more, poor basket."

Menhenheott laughed. " Well, none of us will be going there, or here, much longer. Come on, Phil, we'll have to join the lads. What are you having ? "

" The usual."

" No, you don't. Something special to-night. Gin and lime ? "

She smacked her lips. " I'm in luck," she told Toffit. " Know why ? "

"Let me tell him. Here, Fred, bend over. This isn't for every one. Phyl and me are going to get married on my embarkation leave."

"What about Maud?" said Toffit, simply.

"That's off." Menhenheott's face was momentarily shadowed.

"Well, all the best. I always thought you and Phyl ought to get hitched.—Here, I'll shout you those."

"The hell you will! It's not your wedding."

Mrs. Mills beckoned. "Phone for you, sergeant. A Miss Fletcher. She says it's urgent."

"I haven't been in. You don't know when I will be."

"It's awkward," she told him.

"Now, ma," he pleaded, "you were young once. You know what it is not to want to talk to some one."

"She sounded as if she was crying," said Mrs. Mills reproachfully, the mother of all women.

"Well, I tell you I can't. Just say I haven't been in; it's easy enough."

"All right," she said reluctantly. As she went down the passage towards the telephone she heard the sergeant calling, "Any one seen Phyl? Where's she gone?"

Phyllis Ricks, the receiver to her ear, put a hand across the mouthpiece. "All right, I'm taking it."

"But Mr. Menhenheott said——"

"I know. It's all right."

Mrs. Mills, curious, doubtful, retired; but to the other bar, where she would not have to meet the sergeant's questionings.

"You're the girl he danced with," said Maud Fletcher, her anger telescoping the miles between them, "you went all out to take him from me. You ought to be ashamed. Girls like you ought to be stripped!"

"To be what?" Phyllis asked, this medievalism taking her by surprise.

Maud did not answer. She was silent for so long that Phyllis wondered whether she might not have fainted. Then a bead of voice came through. "You beast."

"I didn't take the call to crow," Phyllis said, "I took it because I wanted to be straight. You can think I'm as bad as you please, but don't think it of Ron. He's done his best

to stick to you. He doesn't know I've answered the 'phone and he won't half be wild when he finds out."

"Liar."

"Don't you call me that."

"You're a liar. So's he. He was always lying, and making excuses."

"You don't seem to like him very much," Phyllis said reasonably, "not if you can say all those things about him."

"You tell him," said Maud vengefully, "that he's not the only one. I know a chap who wouldn't think Ron was worth spitting on."

Phyllis realised that no trace of the tearfulness detected by Mrs. Mills had been evident in her own conversation with the girl. "If I ever found myself talking about Ron like that, no matter what he'd done, I shouldn't think myself fit to have him," she said.

The operator asked if they wanted three more minutes.

"No, thanks."

"I hope you die," said Maud, "and I hope, before you do, that you'll have done to you what you've done to me."

Phyllis replaced the receiver. In the passage she found Menhenheott awaiting her, stiff as a poker with rage. Putting his hands on her shoulders he forced her back into the recess. "Were you talking to Maud?"

"Keep your hair on. Yes."

"Who told you to do any such thing?"

"All right, all right," she said, admiring his hair that gleamed faintly in the half light, the shape of his head outlined by a pencilling of gold from an oil-lamp high in the passage wall, "I know I was a fool, but somehow I felt I could make her feel better about you. You know the sort of thing, what they teach at school—'Honesty's the best policy.' Well, it wasn't."

"What did she say?"

"She wanted to strip me." Phyllis detected the involuntary movement of laughter in his angry body. It passed, and he was again rigid.

"Tell me what she said, you interfering little——" He swallowed the last word. Menhenheott never spoke foully before women.

She repeated the conversation as well as she could remember it, adding, "But it did no good. Come on, Ron, be

decent. I'm sorry. I was wrong. I was a lemon." She kissed his iron cheek. "Still angry?"

After a while—"Oh, all right," said Menhenheott, putting his arms about her. "forget it. You can't help being a damn meddler, can you?"

"Don't nag. I've said I'm sorry. Want me to sing it?"

He said quietly, "Oh, my God, Phyl, I wish I hadn't to be this way. I keep on feeling it still isn't finished, that she'll go on worrying me, that I'll go on feeling rotten."

She took his face between her hands, gently rubbed it. "Now you listen to me," she said sensibly, "you can't expect this business of you and Maudie to just stop, all neat and nice. She will worry you, and you'll go on worrying about her, only it won't exactly come to an end any time. It'll just die off, like a bad headache. One day you'll sort of realise that you aren't feeling bad about Maudie any more. Things," she added, "only stop in stories. In life they just keep getting smaller till they're not there."

He kissed her broad lips. "I do love you, Phyl. I do so love you."

"I know. We love each other, don't we? But I'm going to have a bad time while you're getting Maudie off your mind and being sorry every five minutes. Not that it can be helped. And having a bad time with you would be better than having a good time with anybody else."

"That's how I feel," said Ron Menhenheott.

Eily returned from Strethamfold, where her aunt had rejected her ('I don't care what you've done and what you haven't, I'm not going to be responsible for you, not when you've worried me as you have, and anyway, it's your ma's job to keep you decent'), to find that her mother, prowling about the bedroom, had discovered the glass bowl beneath a pillow and had smashed it against the oil-stove.

It was quite a pretty sight, this destruction, the little shreds of gold and green and red tinfoil spattering the floor, the tiny fragments of glass glittering like waterdrops in the dark corners. A short while ago Eily would have wept to see it. Now she only thought for a moment of the robber's cave in the pantomime, with its strewn brilliants, and she went to fetch a dustpan and brush.

Ma was funny in her way, with her screamings and her

smashings, her dancing dervishings. Even Eily could see that. She could hardly understand now why she had been so afraid to keep her promise to Mrs. Eagles. What happened? She had found her mother relatively sober, sober enough, at least, to take in the tragic and ludicrous tale. When Eily had done, she thought that Ma would strike her, had sought sanctuary between the sofa and the wall; but Ma had simply gone white as a sheet, flopped like an old coat on to a chair and begun talking about the police. He would tell them now, and they'd send her to jail. Eily had got her own mother sent to jail. Yes, maybe the pound note was marked, they were going to trace her by that, and she had spent it in the Lamb. 'You'll ask him not to tell, Eil, you'll ask him not to. He'll listen to you. You tell him that I wasn't to know, that I was only doing what seemed right, as any mother would do for her girl—you tell him all that!'

Yes, Ma had been in a state. I said I'd say what she wanted me to, but of course I didn't mean it. I only wanted to get away. She's been scared barmy ever since. Now, I suppose, she feels a bit safer; so she's trying to punish me. If only it hadn't been my bowl. I could get something nice with what Vic gave me, but it would never be the same.

Eily put on her coat, tied a scarf over her head and went walking in the mist. She felt very peaceful. Above the fog there was moonshine, a glaze of silver far too high to give light. As she passed by the Lamb several of the soldiers called out to her, but she paid no heed. No more of that. I was silly, but I'm not now. She walked out of the village on to the Streathamfold road.

A car was coming over the hill, the muffled beams raking the mist. Eily stepped out in front of it, as calm as you please. Good-bye, all.

There was a little time of darkness. Then, looking up, she saw a man leaning over her, two men. "Is she all right?"

Eily smiled at them. She struggled to her feet.

They were furious. "What the deuce were you doing, jay-walking like that? Stepped out right in front of the car!"

"Do you know you might have been killed?"

She still smiled.

One of the men said anxiously, "Are you all right?"

denly she felt faint, as if she were going to fall down a deep black hole. She clutched at his sleeve.

"What's up?" he said, alarmed.

"Nothing. A bit giddy." She stretched her eyes. "See? All right now."

"You want a drink, only I can't take you into a pub. If you wait I'll get you one, though."

She shook her head. "No. Why are you different?"

"I'm not."

"You are."

"Oh, Eily," he said, turning to her, even to her for comfort, as he had turned before on summer nights in Sandley Wood, "I'm worried. I can't stop thinking about it, about us going."

"Going where?"

"Abroad. We've got to be ready by January 1st." He added quickly, "Oh, Christ, I shouldn't have told you that."

She shrugged. "I shan't tell. Are you scared?" she asked him curiously.

He did not reply.

"I would be," said Eily. She was tired of him, was seeking an excuse to go. Already he had receded into a past that she had no wish to remember, not because it was terrible, but because it was of no importance. All that interested her was the strange thing in her own mind. Fancy, I tried to kill myself. Wasn't that as brave as any soldier?

But I won't now, of course.

"Got to go," she told him, "got to do some darning."

She nodded. She perceived that he was too full of his own worries to care if she went or if she stayed. "Good-night, Eily."

"Good-night."

Going: the soldiers leaving Christenhurst. It would be quiet. I wonder what will happen to me, she thought, or if nothing will happen at all? Poor Chris, he's unhappy, too. Why did I think "too"? Because I'm not unhappy. I wish Ma hadn't broken my bowl, though. It was a spiteful thing to do. And I wish auntie had been nicer.

In films, things happen that make everything nice. Things come to a stop, and you don't hear what happens afterwards.

Not knowing how closely she had echoed the thought of

Phyllis Ricks, she returned to the house, undressed and went to bed. I am not even frightened of raids now, isn't that funny? She put her hand automatically under the pillow in search of the bowl, smiled as her hands touched its hardness. My most precious possession.

She sat bolt upright. But Ma smashed it, Ma smashed it! Groping for the candle, she lit it, waited until the flame was steady, and then drew out a small china pudding basin.

Weakly she began to laugh. Ma is funny! Oh, Ma is so funny! Her tricks are like a kid's. She always thinks she knows what will hurt me, but she's always wrong. The tears rolled down Eily's face. So funny, so funny.

Pride that she was so much stronger than her mother, so much less vulnerable, filled her with joy. How much happier I shall be to-morrow, now that I have learned not to care for anything she does! Blowing out the candle she lay down once more, her hands clasped beneath her chin, and waited for the rescue of which she had no longer the slightest doubt.

When the last customer had left the Fleece, when the glasses had been collected and brought to the draining-board, when all the lights save the one above the sink had been turned out, Sam came suddenly to Gillie and heaved her off her feet. He held her to him, her face on a level with his own, her shoes dangling in space, and he kissed her several times, staring at her lightlessly between kisses as if to see what she was thinking.

Gillie's first rush of anger melted into an apathy faintly touched with pleasure. So Sam was giving way at last, was he? Well, it might be a solution. She had always taken comfort from his prodigious height, the bulk of his body that so flattered her own. "Put me down, you great fool," she said. "What's all this about, anyway?"

"The end of your tricks," he told her, "the end of your tricks. They're going soon, see?—those men you like to play around with. We'll be alone again, unless a fresh lot comes. Why do you think I brought Mike home?"

"I don't know why you do anything," said Gillie. Still holding her, he gazed intently at her lips, seemed to read in them something that destroyed his hope. He dumped her down on the floor, turned away and began to wash the

glasses, handing them across the bench for her to wipe. They worked in silence, swiftly, carefully, husband and wife. The silence was heavy about them, the fog swimming about the single lamp.

At last she turned to him. "Sambo!" She knew what she must do if she were to make a good life for herself; and that was to strengthen the seed of love he had so unexpectedly, so incongruously, implanted in her muddled thoughts. She was resolute enough, strong enough, to know when she must abandon fantasy, the sugared dream retained from adolescence. Looking at him, she saw not his grossness, but his height; not his greyness, but his calm; not his stupidity, but his infinite, tireless irony. He had been waiting for her, knowing that she must come to him, if not to-day then to-morrow. Though she did not love Sam, she was for the first time conscious that she might achieve some curious love for him and that in the meantime he could give her a measure of joy.

"What?" he demanded, approaching her as deliberately as a father who means to punish a child for its own good.

Even as she stood there, acting love, forcing it into her eyes, allowing her lips to move as if there were words she might speak but dare not, for fear of his anger (Sam's lumbering, elderly anger!) she knew that the whole performance was near to being wrecked by some involuntary infusion of sincerity, of genuine excitement; and that it was of this weakening, defeating sincerity that he meant to take advantage.

"Sam," said Gillie, trembling, and she closed her eyes as, with the rage and vigour of a young man, he kissed her speaking mouth.

In the night there was singing. The two streams from the Lamb and the Fleece converged, and the voices were jolly, raucous, in the mists.

> I've got spurs that jingle jangle jingle
> As I go riding merrily along
> And they say O ain't you glad you're single . . .

Elvorden, walking alone, bumped into Tom Berry, who

was mumbling in rapture the final verse of his completed poem.

"Sorry," said Elvorden. His mind, cleared of Gillie and her feverish magic, was sketching a future of desert glory, of heroic rearguard actions, of great advances, of the trek beneath a catafalque of fighter planes along the great coast road of Africa. He had even forgotten the unpleasantness in the Fleece, the B.C's. rebuke. Meeting Toller, he fell into step with him, and they walked in silence wondered how he could hint that all rivalry between them was ended.

Tom Glaiden and Cameron-Leckie were in the Battery Office, working late on the leave roster. "Got to be fair to every one," the B.C. said, "give 'em all a chance."

Mulcaster, after crouching for three-quarters of an hour in Mrs. Mills' kitchen, had caught a mouse.

Strutt and Cassilis, standing on the bridge, were listening to the Quartermaster as he told an ancient tale to a group of N.C.O.s lingering still outside the Lamb, a tale in which Batty Jouvet, Corporal O'Grady and little Pelletrini strode like giants across the breadth of a world too small to contain their glories.

"Tell it to the marines!" cried a sudden, crude voice in the shadows, and Conway roared out, "Who the hell said that?" A river of laughter ran beneath the roof of the fog. Felse was heard to threaten, and then the Quartermaster himself laughed aloud.

"It's been a week," said Strutt. "I'll have the hell of a lot to tell my wife, when I get the time to write her more than a scrappy note. She'll be upset about the draft, though. Not that I won't have to save that item of news until I see her."

"I have only an uncle to be upset about me," Cassilis murmured. "Perhaps it's as well. Oh, Lord, how I long for peace! Nobody more. I long for my work, for all the messing-about backstage, the conferences, the rows, the damned, interfering producers. Sometimes I'm sick with longing; but I wouldn't take a 'peace at any price.'"

"It wouldn't be sense or good business. If you did take that kind of peace your work would go to hell. There'd be only a caricature of it left. Still, I don't like thinking about the war myself. When the devil is something going to happen? We seem to be stuck in a sort of bog, with no

y." ask me why." ask me why." ask me wh

. . to the war . . to the war . . to the war

th you." I'm with you." I'm with you." I'm w